

ASCENDANCE OF A BOOKWORM

Hannelore's Fifth Year
at the Royal Academy
~ Volume 2 ~

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Prologue

Kenntrips followed Cordula through passageways meant for servants. They were headed to Hannelore's room—which was strange, he thought, since men weren't usually permitted on the dormitory's third floor. The rule existed to protect the girls living there, enforced so strictly that even a retainer serving the archducal family would rarely be granted an exception.

So why me?

Because he could explain things to Hannelore that Cordula couldn't? It felt like a flimsy excuse—certainly not enough to justify entering a young woman's quarters. Kenntrips winced at each creak beneath his feet, terrified someone might catch him.

"This way, Kenntrips. Hurry."

He slipped from the passageway and darted through the door Cordula held open. Past the retainers' room, he saw her—Hannelore, for the first time in ten days. She looked dazed, as if she had just woken, but at least she was seated in a chair rather than floating.

As he drew closer, Kenntrips noticed that Hannelore still gave off a faint glow, the lingering traces of the goddess's divine power making him slightly uneasy. Thankfully, she didn't blast him or Cordula away, as her possessor once had. She turned at the sound of their approach, and Kenntrips saw that her eyes were no longer the yellow of divine descent. They had returned to their familiar red.

"My apologies, Kenntrips," Hannelore said, her consideration assuring him she was no longer hosting a goddess. "I understand it must be... *uncomfortable* to be on the girls' floor, but Cordula insisted this was the only way I could receive your report."

Hannelore's consciousness hadn't returned when the goddess departed, and Kenntrips had feared it never would. Seeing her now, exactly as he remembered her, nearly brought a tear to his eye.

Thank goodness she's back.

"Would you tell me what happened after the gazebo's magic

circle lit up?” Hannelore asked.

“Do you recall that your farewell caused light to rise from your charm and form a magic circle in midair?”

“Yes, I vaguely remember hearing the knights’ panicked voices and their footsteps as they raced toward us—though my memory ends with the magic circle beginning to glow.”

“We retainers surrounded the gazebo but could not get too close,” Cordula said. “Kenntrips is the only one who can tell us precisely what happened when the goddess descended.”

I could also mention her attempts to propose to Lord Wilfried, Kenntrips thought, but that part of their meeting was best left unsaid.

“I shall clean up the jureve and stall the other retainers so they do not interrupt you,” Cordula said. “Kenntrips, explain what you can.”

Kenntrips closed his eyes, recalling the events of that fateful day before beginning his explanation. Dregarnuhr the Goddess of Time had descended, ruthlessly ejecting those within the gazebo. An audience soon gathered, and Aub Alexandria was summoned, though something in her duchy delayed her arrival. Even when she came and was taken by the goddess, it did nothing to restore Hannelore’s consciousness.

Kenntrips went on to recount the advice Rozemyne’s head attendant had given him, as well as the exchange between Wilfried and Ortwin.

“Lord Ortwin then asked to propose to you, and—”

“One moment. He truly said that, then and there?” Hannelore asked, overcome with surprise. “Cordula told me Drewanchel proposed after Korinthsdaum.”

“In the gazebo, Lord Ortwin said only that he wished to propose. He had to meet with Aub Dunkelfelger to formally announce his intentions—hence why his proposal came afterward.”

“I see. Forgive my interruption.”

Hannelore gave an embarrassed smile, though Kenntrips could tell she appreciated Ortwin’s intentions. In contrast to the assertive way she had demanded engagement tasks from Wilfried, she had seemed so shy and overtly feminine when the Drewanchel archduke candidate made his declaration. She had never behaved that way with Kenntrips or Rasantark, her engagement candidates. In fact, she had practically grimaced upon learning they had been chosen.

Is she truly that eager to leave Dunkelfelger?

“How do you feel about the matter, Lady Hannelore?”

Kenntrips asked, fighting to keep the ache in his chest from reaching his voice. Her lack of interest in the suitors her father had chosen seemed painfully clear.

“Hmm?”

Wanting only to ensure Hannelore’s happiness, Kenntrips swallowed his displeasure and said, “If you truly wish to leave Dunkelfelger, it might be wise to consider accepting Lord Ortwin’s proposal. Drewanchel is a greater duchy—it has the means to protect a divine avatar like you. Given the present confusion, I suspect you could steer the outcome of the contest for your hand as you please.”

Hannelore blinked, tilting her head in confusion. “Did you not swear to protect me?”

Kenntrips fell silent. The certainty in her gaze—the quiet trust that he would protect her—made his head spin. Of course he cared for her safety, but was she right to rely on it? Was that truly the look one should give a suitor she didn’t wish to marry?

If you have no intention of being with me, why must you bewitch me so?!

He drew a slow breath.

I am composed. I am at ease. My heart is at peace.

“May I continue my report?” the apprentice scholar asked, neatly sidestepping the question. “The true chaos began with the goddess’s departure.”

“O-Oh. Yes, of course.”

Hannelore reached for her teacup, eyes clouded with uncertainty. Kenntrips noticed the faint glow emanating from her fingertips and couldn’t help but grimace, reminded of the divine power that lingered within her. It felt as though the goddess were still there, watching him through her.

“We were kept busy with minor tasks after returning to the dormitory, though I shan’t dwell on them,” Kenntrips continued. “Most were managed by your retainers, so I trust Lady Cordula will offer a clearer account.”

Rozemyne’s head attendant had insisted that Hannelore would remain unresponsive until she regained consciousness and that a jureve would be required for her protection. Cordula had sent an ordonnanz to Dunkelfelger to request one, then spent her time

reporting to Sieglinde, who had traveled to the dormitory for an update.

“I might have helped more, but I received an urgent summons from Zent Eglantine,” Kenntrips said. “It became my highest priority—something I could not delegate to Lady Cordula.”

“The Zent summoned you?!” Hannelore exclaimed, setting down her teacup as her eyes widened in astonishment.

Kenntrips wasn’t sure the news warranted such surprise. The royal family had once summoned witnesses over a ritual that produced a pillar of light; their reaction to the literal descent of a goddess was only natural.

“All three of us from the gazebo were summoned to give reports,” Kenntrips explained. “That much was to be expected. What caught me off guard was the stir Lord Raufereg caused, insisting on accompanying me as our duchy’s representative.”

“For what reason? He was not even at the gazebo. I fail to see what he hoped to contribute.”

Any reasonable person would share her confusion. Raufereg had argued that it was unthinkable rude for a “mere apprentice archscholar” to appear before the Zent—though his arriving uninvited would have been far worse.

“We retainers collectively reprimanded him for either forgetting or never learning such basic etiquette, then proceeded to our meeting with the Zent as planned. Lord Raufereg seems to believe that proposing to you has earned him a place among your engagement candidates.”

“Well, he is sorely mistaken,” Hannelore said, her brow tightly knit as she took another sip of tea. From her demeanor, Kenntrips could tell she neither wished to be with Raufereg nor intended to marry him merely to make him the next archduke. Her retainers’ actions had worried him, so the realization came as a tremendous relief.

“Lords Wilfried and Ortwin reported on the goddess’s descent,” he continued, “so I focused on what Lady Cordula requested of me. I inquired about borrowing silver cloth and how your grades might be salvaged if you slept too long, as happened with Lady Rozemyne.”

Kenntrips and the others had laid as much groundwork as possible in case the worst came to pass, but Hannelore awoke sooner than expected. Though her ten-day slumber meant she

would finish her classes later than usual, she was no longer in danger of running out of time.

“My apologies,” Hannelore said. “This is all my fault. Did, um... Did the Zent’s summons trouble you at all? I remember being agonizingly stressed each time the former Prince Anastasius wished to speak with me.”

Despite the regret in her eyes, Kenntrips had not been particularly worried. He had just witnessed the arrival of a goddess; nothing the Zent could do would even compare. Besides, he had been tasked with collecting information about the divine descent and planning for the future.

“More troublesome for me was Rasantark’s interrogation. You recall he invited you to that gazebo, yes? To show you flowers, or something of the sort.”

No sooner had the apprentice knight learned of the events that led to Hannelore’s coma than he had rounded on Kenntrips. “Why was she there with Lord Wilfried when I extended the invitation?! What did they discuss?! Why didn’t you intervene?! Hey! Put that blasted sound-blocker away! You can’t hide from this!”

It had taken the combined efforts of an entire group of retainers to hold Rasantark back long enough for Kenntrips to explain. The apprentice knight had calmed somewhat upon learning it was a meeting of archduke candidates, but getting him to that point had been a nightmare.

“Ah, yes... I can imagine,” Hannelore said. “I went at Lord Wilfried’s invitation, but still—I must apologize to Rasantark nonetheless.”

“As it stands, the only thoughts occupying his mind are of the upcoming ditto match. You are not wrong to worry, but the time to address it has passed; he would only respond with confusion.”

Rasantark had acted out for some time, but that changed when he learned that Korinthsdaum and Drewanchel had challenged Dunkelfelger to bride-stealing ditto. His eyes lit up at the news, and he immediately turned to Kenntrips, declaring, “This is no time for infighting! Let’s team up and blow these pests away!”

Kenntrips could only nod in agreement. He wished he were so purehearted—that his own ugly feelings of anger and jealousy could vanish so easily.

I am the envious one now, Rasantark.

No matter what happened, Kenntrips knew he and Hannelore

would never be together. Even if they won the upcoming ditter match and turned away every other proposal that surely would follow, she would not be able to choose a partner, and the passage of time would leave Rasantark as her only option.

“Many duchies have sent requests for ditter, Lady Hannelore, and Korinthsdaum was first among them.”

Sigiswald sought Hannelore as a first wife, intent on leveraging his former royal status to secure her. Kenntrips opposed the idea, of course—Sigiswald cared only for the backing of a divine avatar and the greater duchy she represented, and his mistreatment of Adolphine made it painfully clear he was unfit to be Hannelore’s husband.

“I am told Lord Sigiswald does not see himself as an archduke and instead clings to his status as former royalty,” Kenntrips continued. “In that sense, he is the most dangerous of your suitors; he might hope to use your new divinity to obtain the Grutrissheit himself. You must be careful not to say anything he could exploit.”

Hannelore and Sigiswald would most likely interact only at the Interduchy Tournament, but plenty of Korinthsdaum students at the Royal Academy could relay her words to the former prince. Hannelore nodded, her expression taut. Her wariness confirmed for Kenntrips that she had no interest in marrying Sigiswald, so he silently removed Korinthsdaum from his unwritten list.

“Then there is Drewanchel,” he said. “Lord Ortwin formally challenged us to bride-stealing ditter through his duchy. He seems to seek your hand for love, not personal gain.”

“I... I see.”

Hannelore had barely reacted to the mention of Sigiswald, yet now she shyly averted her eyes. Kenntrips doubted she had fallen for Ortwin—after all, she had still proposed to Wilfried in the gazebo—but she seemed to at least recognize him as a member of the opposite sex.

Hmm... Does she seek to join Drewanchel, then?

Ortwin had not faltered when Hannelore confessed to Wilfried. In fact, he seemed almost to encourage it. He must have known Wilfried would not reciprocate and thought it best for Hannelore to confront her emotions directly rather than pine for another man.

If so, we’re in agreement.

That common thread made it all the more heart-wrenching for Kenntrips that Hannelore had reacted to Ortwin yet showed no

interest in the man before her very eyes. Trying not to focus on the pain, he put on his best polite smile and continued.

“Klassenberg also expressed an interest in you. Their next aub already has a first wife, but if fortune favors them, they seem ready to demote her to a second wife so that you may take her place.”

Indeed, even Klassenberg had entered the contest. As the home duchy of Zent Eglantine, they were in no rush for a new first wife—but they would prefer to have Hannelore than not. Going forward, the position of Zent would be reserved not for the current ruler’s kin, but for those capable of acquiring the Grutrissheit through their own power. It made sense, then, that they wanted the new divine avatar on their side.

“The other requests were less notable,” Kenntrips explained. “Many wish to participate simply because there is much to gain and nothing to lose, and several formerly defeated duchies hope to get closer to the Sovereignty.”

Trauerqual, who had become Zent through the civil war, had stepped down, and Eglantine had taken his place by receiving the Grutrissheit from Rozemyne. The transition of power had effectively erased the notion of “winning” and “losing” duchies, along with the political weight such titles once carried.

“Some duchies seek the recognition of the new Zent and the gods, so they are more than eager to have a divine avatar in their midst.”

“Their intentions aside, are the losing duchies not worn down from the events of recent years?” Hannelore asked. “I see no reason they could stand a chance against us.”

Dunkelfelger’s military might was such that no middle or lesser duchy could hope to defeat them. There might have been cause for concern if someone as capable as the Lord of Evil were among the students, but even then, Dunkelfelger’s experience with Rozemyne’s devious schemes had made them more wary of trickery than before.

“I would agree—if not for Lord Raufereg,” Kenntrips said. “The dormitory is divided, as are your retainers.”

“My retainers...?”

Since their ditter match against Ehrenfest, Hannelore’s retinue had worked to improve her reputation at home, where her actions had earned considerable ire. Just as other duchies longed to claim the second divine avatar for themselves, Dunkelfelger’s nobles sought to keep her from leaving.

Yet Hannelore had shown no interest in the engagement candidates her father had chosen, focusing instead on getting closer to Wilfried. No matter how she tried to conceal it, her lingering feelings for the Ehrenfest archduke candidate were obvious—as was the distance she maintained from her suitors.

Observing their lady's behavior, some retainers refused to cooperate with Lestilaut's retinue—especially given his role in instigating the ditter match against Ehrenfest—and seized the opportunity to make Hannelore the next aub instead. Soon, the opinion spread that she should marry Raufereg, both to secure her rise to power and to ensure her continued presence in Dunkelfelger.

One could say we brought this upon ourselves.

Kenntrips could only despair at the state of the dormitory. He felt responsible for failing to maintain harmony within Hannelore's inner circle.

"They thought they were acting in your best interests," he said. "And since we could not consult you, there was nothing we could do to stop them. I admit, as your suitor, I am partly to blame."

"Raufereg is such a nuisance... Were those all the proposals?"

Kenntrips studied Hannelore intently. Did she grasp the nuance of her question? The goddess had descended immediately after her proposal to Wilfried, and she had been unconscious ever since. From her perspective, barely a moment had passed since her rejection.

The truth will surely sadden her.

Still, Kenntrips had no choice but to continue.

"Though many duchies put their names forward, Ehrenfest was not among them," he said, watching Hannelore closely. How would she react to hearing that not even becoming the second divine avatar had been enough to sway the boy she desired? Kenntrips hated the thought of seeing her miserable, but he needed to know how she truly felt.

"That comes as no surprise. Lord Wilfried strives for peace in Ehrenfest; he does not wish to become its next aub. He would not compete against so many other duchies—or even his own siblings—for my sake."

Hannelore wasn't crying, and her voice remained steady. She exuded a maturity Kenntrips had never seen in her before.

"How strange..." he muttered.

"Pardon?"

“You look exactly as I remember, but your attitude is remarkably different. It’s almost as if, when you were whisked away to the world of the gods, you matured more than the rest of us.”

Hannelore blinked several times, then giggled. Kenntrips’s eyes widened at the unexpected response, but nothing prepared him for her next words.

“You are always the first to notice changes in me.”

Kenntrips’s mind went blank. Hannelore knew how closely he kept an eye on her. He set his cup down, trying to steady his breathing and preserve an air of composure.

Hannelore shyly averted her gaze, seemingly unaware of his panic. “As thanks for the use of my vessel, the Goddess of Time permitted my return to the world as it was a year ago.”

At last, the pieces fell into place. Kenntrips recalled Wilfried saying he might have agreed to the proposal a year ago. The worry that had gripped his mind melted instantly, replaced by a sharp bitterness.

She loved him enough to continue past his rejection and even borrow the power of a goddess...?

He had thought her affection more tepid. He had assumed she would give up after being refused, which was why he had agreed to help her confess in the first place. Never in his wildest dreams had he imagined her feelings were strong enough for her to seek divine power to see them through.

“In that case, did you and Lord Wilfried...?”

“No, not even then. I was thinking only of my own desires, not what Lord Wilfried might be going through. I loved being in love, and my emotions blinded me to the truth. I twisted the advice and warnings of my retainers to serve my own purposes.”

In a low voice, Hannelore lamented that her rush to return to the past—her belief that Wilfried would keep his word—had ended in complete failure. From what Kenntrips could tell, the Ehrenfest archduke candidate’s life had changed dramatically after the true ditter match. A year exactly seemed far too soon.

I see... The goddess sent her back a year, as she requested, but not to a moment well suited for her to confess.

Hannelore’s insistence on defending Wilfried had caused a rift between her and her retainers. She had known he was being isolated but could not command her retinue to investigate further, leaving her unaware of the full scope of his situation.

Should I have shared my knowledge with her?

Kenntrips could tell from her weak voice and downcast eyes that Hannelore was wounded—she had proposed twice and received just as many rejections—but he knew not how to console her. As much as he wanted to put her mind at ease, he struggled to wrest control of his own emotions. Part of him was relieved that things between her and Wilfried were over, yet another part seethed, furious that he hadn't been there to protect her and that Wilfried had hurt her once again.

"If you had only received the proper intelligence, things might not have turned out this way..." Kenntrips mused aloud.

"Yes, I do wonder about that. But even though I could not forge a path to success, I would not change what happened. I do not wish to erase the past year of my history."

"Come again?"

"I might not have secured a future with Lord Wilfried," Hannelore said with a shy smile, "but I learned a great deal in the attempt."

Though she had never received the engagement tasks she longed for, she gained much from her talk with Eglantine and even managed a calm discussion with her retainers to clear the air. She also came to reconsider the looks she received from Kenntrips and Rasantark. What she once mistook for cold rejection or criticism of her worth as an archduke candidate, she now recognized as anything but.

"Do you remember the pack of helwolves that attacked our gathering spot after last year's regeneration ceremony?" Hannelore asked.

"Yes. It was nightmarish."

"I knew it would be, so I insisted we prepare. I remember how stunned you looked when I declared I would use the offensive magic tool you made for me." Hannelore chuckled. "Yes, that was exactly the expression you made."

Kenntrips was too stunned for words. He had created a magic tool to protect Hannelore during their dinner match against Ehrenfest, yet she had neglected to use it, even at the most crucial moment. He had assumed it would never be activated.

"May I ask why you decided to use it?" he eventually managed.

"It was too powerful to use against people—but no such mercy was necessary for feybeasts."

She thought it too strong to use against her enemies?!

Hannelore's response was so reminiscent of her days as Lady Crybaby that Kenntrips could only slump in his seat. He had made his tool as powerful as he could to ensure victory, never once imagining its strength would dissuade her from using it.

"I approached the helwolves alone so no one else would be caught in the blast radius, then activated the tool within the pack," Hannelore explained.

The mere image sent a shiver down Kenntrips's spine. He couldn't fathom how he might have reacted if he had actually seen it happen.

"As a result," Hannelore continued, "I was able to claim victory—but not without arousing your suspicion."

She explained that, not long after the attack, the other Kenntrips had remarked on her maturity. Her actions sounded so out of character that present-day Kenntrips knew he, too, would have been suspicious.

"You saw through me, so I was torn rather suddenly from the past, and the changes I made were just as quickly undone. Such was my agreement with the goddess."

Kenntrips swallowed, feeling the blood drain from his face. Because of him, Hannelore had lost the remarkable opportunity granted by the Goddess of Time.

"My apologies," he said. "I ruined the goddess's reward for you."

"Think nothing of it. She allowed me to keep my memories—and with the knowledge I gained, I am better equipped to live as my true self."

Hannelore wore a small, proud smile—an expression Kenntrips would never have seen from Lady Crybaby. Her maturity was bittersweet; he felt both upset that she was outgrowing him and in awe at how far she had come. Gone was the fragility that had once compelled him to protect her, replaced by an unmistakable beauty that could turn any head.

"I thank you ever so much for always being so considerate toward me," she said, her expression turning somewhat mischievous.

"Hmm?"

"Please, let this be our secret. I might not have changed anything, but word of my arrangement with the goddess would only

exacerbate rumors of my borrowed divinity.”

Are there not far more pressing concerns?!

The way she teased him, leaving enough ambiguity in her gratitude to hint at something more, was outright cruel. How was Kenntrips meant to respond? He reminded himself not to cling to foolish hopes and exhaled deeply, emptying his lungs in a single breath.

“Kenntrips?” Hannelore asked, eyeing him quizzically. He was still searching for a response when Cordula returned.

“Have you both finished?” the head attendant asked.

“Forgive me, but there is one more thing I must say.” Kenntrips took a steadying breath and stood ramrod straight. The concern in Hannelore’s eyes made it clear her words held no hidden meaning. “I wish to know how you truly feel, Lady Hannelore. Many duchies now vie for your hand in marriage. Tell me whom you wish to marry, and I shall devote myself entirely to making it happen.”

Hannelore paused, furrowing her brow and casting her eyes down, occasionally muttering under her breath. She wasn’t looking for a surface-level response; she was trying to get to the true heart of the matter. She contemplated a question that would shape the rest of her life, letting more of her frustration show than usual.

At last, she gave Kenntrips a somewhat pathetic, help-seeking look. “Kenntrips... I cannot yet decide. I must ask for more time, lest Liebeshilfe the Goddess of Binding move too quickly.”

It seemed the gods themselves still meddled in her affairs. Kenntrips did not know what troubled her, but it made an already difficult decision even harder. A small smile tugged at the corners of his lips; even now that she was a divine avatar, her indecisiveness remained unchanged.

“For now, perhaps we could rule out those you know you would never choose,” he suggested.

“Yes, absolutely. In that case, let us begin by unifying the dormitory. It would serve us poorly to take on the other duchies while our own forces are divided. I shall summon my retainers. And as for Raufereg...”

Kenntrips chuckled as Hannelore began to scheme. He had a much quicker solution.

“I could simply beat him down.”

“Beat him... down?” Hannelore looked to Cordula for an explanation.

“We let him propose because we were unsure how you felt about him,” Kenntrips continued. “But if you consider him a pest, I will not hesitate. I will crush him with all my might, both as your suitor and as Lord Lestilaut’s retainer.”

By focusing on interduchy relations and avoiding conflict with Hannelore’s retainers, Kenntrips had given Raufereg’s already bloated ego room to swell. But no matter how strong the boy claimed to be, he was still only a first-year; he would not stand a chance against Rasantark, an apprentice knight, or Kenntrips, a well-trained apprentice scholar of the sword.

“He said he would stake his claim to the archducal seat, and history shows that duels between archduke candidates—and between their retainers—are a common way to settle such disputes. Let us destroy him. For the dormitory’s sake.”

Seeing the color drain from Hannelore’s face, Kenntrips realized his frustration with Raufereg’s chicanery had pushed him to harsher language than necessary. In the presence of the sensitive young woman who had refused to use his magic tool for fear of harming her enemies, he would need to be more careful.

“This is purely hypothetical, but”—Hannelore’s eyes welled with tears—“what would you do if I said I wanted to become the next aub?”

Kenntrips considered the question only briefly. If she truly wished to rule, she wouldn’t see Raufereg as such an obstacle, nor would she speak so honestly to one of her brother’s retainers. She could claim the goddess had ordained that she become the next aub. He knew such a future would never come to pass, but he suspected that wasn’t the answer she sought.

A single question sprang to Kenntrips’s mind: What would become of him if Hannelore truly strove to be the next aub? Perhaps he ought to answer in a way that would make her more conscious of him as a suitor.

“Let me see... As a young woman, you would need to marry an archduke candidate to become the next aub. I would see to it that every candidate who offered you his hand was eliminated, until none remained.”

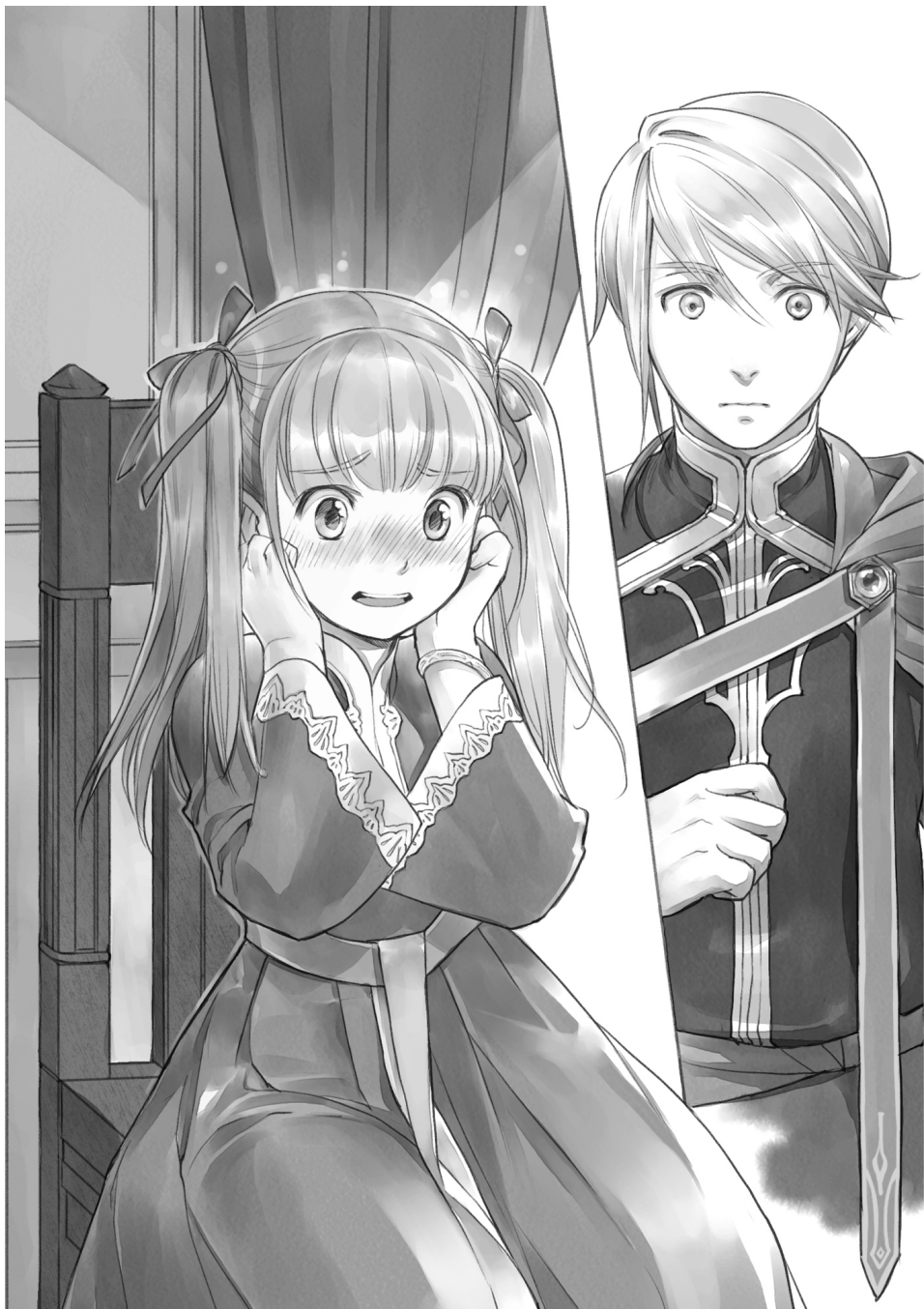
“You would go after the men?” Hannelore asked, unsettled. “Not me, for opposing my brother?”

Kenntrips returned the kindest smile he could. “Be at ease, Lady Hannelore—though I would destroy any archduke candidate who

attempted to wed you, I would not allow harm to come to you personally. And if you chose to give up on becoming the aub, I would accept full responsibility for the consequences.”

Immediately, Hannelore’s cheeks flushed crimson. She looked down at her feet, trying to hide her embarrassment, and frantically shook her head. “Th-Th-That doesn’t put me at ease in the slightest!”

As he gazed upon her, Kenntrips reached a single conclusion: Hannelore was at her absolute cutest when blushing over him.



Convincing the Retainers

“Have you calmed down yet, Lady Hannelore?”

Cordula had just returned from seeing Kenntrips off. She and my other retainers could explain everything else that had happened in my absence, so his presence was no longer required. My head attendant had also insisted that I would never regain my composure unless he left.

Am I really to blame, though?! No one could stay calm after a declaration like that!

I clutched the magic tool on my wrist, letting it absorb the mana rampaging through my body—but even that barely helped. My agitation was so bad that I considered fetching an empty feystone. And to make matters worse, Cordula was watching me with the look one reserved for a particularly troublesome child.

“Cordula, I... was merely caught unawares,” I said—a feeble excuse at best. “My cheeks might be red, and my mana might be running rampant, but there is no deeper meaning to it. I am simply unused to such compliments.”

“If you wish to convince me, you could at least try harder to compose yourself,” my head attendant replied, one eyebrow arched. “This behavior ill befits an archduke candidate of a greater duchy. Kenntrips is one of your suitors—chosen by your father, no less. Was his pitiful attempt at courting truly enough to leave you so flustered?”

Her words carried a chill, yet hearing her refer to Kenntrips’s pleasant remarks as “courting” brought me both comfort and further embarrassment.

“Cordula, I only wish to confirm something... Kenntrips’s sweet words weren’t meant in earnest, were they? I didn’t mishear him—he was acting purely on Father’s orders, correct?”

My head attendant stared down at me, brow furrowed. “Lady Hannelore, what exactly are you asking me?” I could tell she was ready to listen this time, not merely to scold me, so I drew a slow breath and spoke my mind.

"I wish to know where I stand with Kenntrips. I suspect he only said those things to appease my father and reassert himself as my suitor."

"Has he done anything to warrant that suspicion?"

"He confessed to me—then claimed he couldn't trust me after I betrayed my duchy. And to complicate matters further, he offered to help me leave Dunkelfelger."

More confusing still, he had told me to confess to Lord Wilfried. Were it not for his encouragement, I never would have found the courage to act. His wish to help me, the concern in his eyes, and his refusal to trust me had all seemed genuine at once.

"I no longer know what he truly feels," I murmured. "Were those tender words sincere, or merely compliance with Father's command?"

Cordula said nothing. She only shook her head, pressing her fingers to her temples with a look of utter defeat. I cast my eyes down, desperate to justify my anguish.

"As often as I misread people, I truly thought Kenntrips saw me as a traitor and an unfit archduke candidate. At the very least, I assumed he wanted me gone from the duchy. How could I have expected him to court me? It caught me completely off guard, and now I find myself at a loss."

Cordula paused, then looked me in the eye. "Why did you pose that peculiar question to him?"

"He seemed so outraged by Raufereg that I wanted to know how he might react if rumors spread that I, too, aspired to become the next aub. By learning his intentions, I could prepare myself—both physically and mentally."

I had simply wanted to know whether his loyalty to my brother would lead him to abandon me without hesitation, or whether he trusted me enough to say he would never expect me to compete for the role.

And yet, he chose to court me! Of course I was shocked—it came entirely out of the blue!

Despite my internal protests, Cordula only knit her brow. "How did his words make you feel, milady? They clearly affected you."

She was right. My heart had raced, my cheeks burned, my mind went blank, and my mana surged. Even now, the memory of Kenntrips's gray eyes made my pulse quicken anew.

"Because he surprised me!" I exclaimed. "The same goes for

Lord Ortwin!"

"He surprised you, hmm? Good grief... Could your suitors be any more passive? I shall instruct them both to court you more often, so you stop blushing at every flirtation."

"Cordula, what are you saying?!" My heart would give out under such a siege. "What if Kenntrips were to take you seriously?!"

"You must learn not to let such things rattle you. Numerous duchies are competing for your hand; I cannot have you making such faces in public whenever some backwater suitor pays you a compliment."

I buried my face in my hands. Were my feelings truly that obvious? The mere thought of Kenntrips courting me daily made my cheeks burn hotter still.

"Wait, Cordula! I am not emotionally prepared...!"

"We cannot afford to wait for that to change. In your current state, another duchy could manipulate you with ease."

"Then let me remain in my chambers!"

"If you were bedridden, perhaps. But you are not—and you have already missed far too many classes. The Academy will close long before you learn to harden your heart."

I fell silent. Time had marched on during my visit to the world of the gods, leaving me behind in my studies. The thought of returning to class—of everyone staring at me—made my heart sink.

"Lady Rozemyne's head attendant warned us that lending one's body to a goddess can have lingering effects," Cordula said. "From what I can tell, the divine power left you when you awoke, but I still worry about you going outside."

I could not see it myself, but the goddess's touch remained around me as a faint glow.

"How long was I unconscious?" I asked.

"Ten days have passed since you went to the gazebo."

"Ten days?! Even accounting for the time I spent in the past, I would never have thought I was away so long. I wonder when Lady Rozemyne will return." She had mended one thread of history, but countless others remained. Her retainers and everyone in Alexandria must have been beside themselves with concern.

"She has endured this once before, has she not?" Cordula asked. "Perhaps you should contact her head attendant. It might put your mind at ease to hear how they managed. I daresay they are anxious to know how their lady fares now."

I nodded. The divine power had mostly left my body, so the meeting would comfort Lady Rozemyne's retainers more than it would me.

"You may return to class after meeting Aub Alexandria's head attendant," Cordula continued, "but first, you must unify the dormitory. Disaster will strike if we do not make your intentions clear and refocus our students at once. The remnants of divine power within you should make them more receptive than usual. I shall arrange for you to speak after dinner."

"Very well, but I wish to speak with my other retainers first. I must apologize for my behavior and make it clear that I have no intention of becoming the next aub. I cannot leave them divided as they are."

I wanted to mend the rift among my retinue, as I had done before. Cordula praised my maturity—the product of my recent trials—then lowered her eyes.

"Your determination does you credit... but you have no reason to apologize to us," she said. "On the contrary, it is we who must seek forgiveness. Be ready."

"C-Come again...?" I stammered, unsure what she meant.

Cordula sighed, producing her *schatappe* and an *ordonnanz* stone. "Keeping them united proved impossible. In your absence, there was no one to restrain them, and Aub Dunkelfelger could not come to the Royal Academy before the Interduchy Tournament. Their loyalty drove them to act against my every warning."

My unease deepened as Cordula spoke to the *ordonnanz* and sent it flying from the room.

"Lady Hannelore! You're awake!"

"And your eyes are red again! What a relief!"

Barely a moment later, my apprentice attendant Andrea and apprentice guard knight Heilliese were fighting to be first through the door. My other female retainers followed in a more orderly fashion, grinning from ear to ear. The boys would have to wait until dinner.

"I am sorry to have worried you," I said, smiling as I looked over my retainers. "As you can see, I am perfectly fine."

"To think a goddess would descend into you, Lady Hannelore... I could not be prouder to serve you."

"Many duchies are competing for your hand in marriage—did you know?"

“Lord Raufereg is declaring that, as a divine avatar, you are best suited to become the next aub.”

This is nothing like the chasm that once stretched between us.

Seeing them before me, I realized just how much my retainers had changed. The awkward tension that used to weigh on us was gone, replaced with pride, open admiration, and eyes shining with excitement. It wasn't at all the reaction I had expected.

“Settle down, everyone,” Cordula said, silencing the room with a sharp clap of her hands. “You're overwhelming her.”

My retainers closed their mouths at once and straightened their backs.

I took a cautious step forward, having reflexively retreated in surprise. At last, I understood why Cordula had brought Kenntrips all the way to the third floor, and why she had chosen to attend to me alone. I would never have been able to handle this onslaught mere moments after awakening.

“I have given Lady Hannelore my report of the past ten days,” Cordula announced. “She is disappointed that the dormitory has grown so divided. With all the ditter challenges we have received, we must stand together now more than ever.”

Her intervention gave me the moment I needed to steady my breathing and face my retainers calmly. “First, I wish to know why any of you would think to side with Raufereg. I made my refusal perfectly clear, did I not?”

Raufereg's proposal had stemmed entirely from his love of ditter and his wish to participate in true ditter. The phrasing of my refusal might have been meant for other duchies, but my retainers had witnessed me turn him down regardless. At the time, none of us had taken his declaration seriously.

“Well, because Lord Raufereg wouldn't be such a poor match for you,” Andrea said.

“Is that so?” I asked, tilting my head in puzzlement. “I was told that at this most crucial time, when we must unite against the intrusion of a certain former prince and the duchies that followed him, he obstinately insisted he had every right to join the fray and propose.”

As it stood, I saw no good in him whatsoever. My retainers who sided with him hurried to provide their input.

“You have endured such hardship these past two years, Lady Hannelore. I wish to see you rise to a more honorable position.

With Lord Raufereg's support, even the seat of aub wouldn't be beyond your reach."

"With your triumph in true ditter and standing as a divine avatar, you're far more suited to be aub than Lord Lestilaut!"

"As aub, you wouldn't be limited to one partner. You could even take Lord Wilfried as a secondary husband, securing victory both politically and romantically!"

For them to say such things with straight faces... Something must be wrong with them!

I pressed a hand to my cheek, struggling to collect my thoughts. It took me a moment to fully grasp what they had said.

"Could you elaborate on that last point?" I eventually asked.

My retainers, unaware that Lord Wilfried had refused even to give me engagement tasks, launched into their explanations with broad, excited grins.

"A low-ranking duchy like Ehrenfest could never accept a bride such as you, Lady Hannelore. That's why Lord Wilfried refused you after your ditter match. And given how poorly our people regard him, you couldn't ask him to marry into Dunkelfelger either. In a world where you may take only one husband, both paths would lead to heartache. The aub would deny you—and rightly so."

"But everything changes if *you're* the aub! Lord Wilfried wouldn't turn down a position as your third husband, tucked away in a villa far from any social events."

"You would have Lord Raufereg to secure your rule, a second husband to manage administrative affairs, and Lord Wilfried to fulfill your romantic needs. It's perfect!"

My retainers had clearly searched long and hard for a way to see me married to Lord Wilfried, but their solution bordered on absurdity. One did not become an aub simply to satisfy one's romantic whims.

"No duchy would ever agree to one of their archduke candidates being sequestered in a villa, barred from social events and the Archduke Conference," I said. "It would insult Lord Wilfried and Ehrenfest both."

"Hmm? But it was Ehrenfest who proposed that you become his second wife, with Lady Rozemyne as his first. Another duchy might object, but not his."

They truly had strayed down a strange, shadowed path in my absence. I now understood why Cordula had felt compelled to

apologize.

Could this be a trap set by Liebeskhilfe the Goddess of Binding?

Reconnecting a severed thread was possible, but there was no guarantee it would end well. The goddess's wisdom echoed in my mind.

"I am deeply moved by your loyalty," I said. "I know I have not always been reliable, and that there were times when I was too stubborn to heed your warnings. I thank you for caring for me nonetheless. However... I have no intention of becoming the next aub."

"Why not? It's the only way you could be with Lord Wilfried."

He rejected me! I couldn't even get a single engagement task!

Lord Wilfried had rebuffed me not once but three times—during the Interduchy Tournament two years ago, at the gazebo, and again during my venture into the past. And as if that weren't enough, the Goddess of Time herself had hinted that we weren't meant to be. There was no sense in continuing to chase him.

"I understand the extreme measures it would take to make Lord Wilfried mine," I said, "but a relationship built by force would bring neither of us happiness. I could never wish that on him."

Those who had spoken in Raufereg's favor said nothing.

"Furthermore," I continued, "many who claim to support my becoming the next aub do so because they wish for a puppet to control. My brother is far too self-assured to be manipulated. I, on the other hand, only recently cleared my name through true ditter."

The treatment I had endured over the years had made one thing clear: No one would suddenly take an interest in seeing me become aub unless they stood to benefit from it.

"So much has happened recently that you might have forgotten, but my brother is far better suited to lead than I am. Not only am I a woman, but I've never received an archducal education. His superiority will not falter—least of all because a few nobles have chosen to rally behind me."

I elected not to say it, but the thought of beginning my archducal education filled me with dread. Inheriting administrative duties, memorizing endless oral traditions, enduring the rigorous training to become the Zent's sword... The very idea was unbearable.

"But you are a divine avatar now, Lady Hannelore. Dunkelfelger has far more to gain by keeping you than by marrying you into

another duchy.”

“Anyone who wishes to keep me in Dunkelfelger should be satisfied with my marrying one of my brother’s retainers, as Father has arranged. That way, the duchy remains united, and I can still attend the Archduke Conference as a member of the archducal family.”

The archducal couple were required to attend, but it wasn’t as though other members of the family were forbidden. If I were to marry Kenntrips or Rasantark, I would still be able to go.

“You would truly rather wed a suitor than become the next aub?”

“I would,” I said without hesitation. “I have no desire to rule—nor do I wish to marry Raufereg.”

My retainers who had seemed so taken with the idea slumped their shoulders in disappointment. “Still, wouldn’t Lord Kenntrips and Lord Rasantark look down on you in such an arrangement?” one asked.

“Yes, I fear the same,” another added. “Even with all the talk of ditter while you were unconscious, they never once consulted your guard knights.”

It made sense for my suitors to take charge in handling the flood of challenges Dunkelfelger had received—and I knew they meant no harm—but I couldn’t allow them to ignore my knights.

“Now that you’re the second divine avatar, the whole country would find it easier to accept you as the next Aub Dunkelfelger,” Heilliese ventured.

I sighed. My reputation had taken on a life of its own.

“As flattering as that title sounds, the Goddess of Time only borrowed my body to summon Lady Rozemyne,” I said. “I have not bonded with the gods as she has.”

The surprise on their faces made it clear how much hope they had placed in the idea of my being a divine avatar. If even my retainers expected so much of me, I dreaded to imagine what the students of other duchies were saying. I could hardly bear the thought of facing them.

“As we speak, Lady Rozemyne is working to fulfill the goddess’s request,” I said. “I returned ahead of her because the goddess’s business with me was complete. I cannot speak to the gods as Lady Rozemyne does, nor have they granted me the Grutrissheit. Even reaching their realm freely is beyond me. An ordonnanz can carry

words—nothing more.”

If they expected me to become a second Lady Rozemyne, they were only setting themselves up for disappointment. I had been merely a messenger.

“I have no wish to marry into a duchy that values me only as a divine avatar, nor to become the next Aub Dunkelfelger,” I concluded. “Instead, I ask for your help in securing what I *do* desire. First, we must unite the dormitory before our ditter match.”

My retainers exchanged glances, then smiled and nodded.

“Understood, milady. As you wish.”

Hannelore's Lesson

To reunite the dormitory, I needed to do three things: make it known that I had no intention of becoming the next aub, reject Raufereg's proposal in terms that left no room for doubt, and ask every student to devote themselves fully to the upcoming ditler match.

How will this go, I wonder?

My retainers' fervor left me questioning whether the task ahead was even possible.

"You need not be so anxious, Lady Hannelore," Cordula said gently as we made our way downstairs. "Once you refuse Lord Raufereg, your suitors can manage the rest."

I nodded, and together we proceeded to the dining hall. News of my awakening had gone out alongside the summons for my retainers to gather, so a mighty cheer erupted the moment I entered.

"It's such a relief to see you awake, Lady Hannelore."

"You still have a faint glow about you. No one could deny you're a divine avatar."

I smiled at the students calling out to me—just as Rasantark leapt up from his seat, a glimmer in his chestnut eyes. His joy at seeing me was unmistakable. He strode forward without hesitation, as though bearing the most urgent news.

"Fear not, Lady Hannelore!" he proclaimed. "I took charge of every ditler challenge in your absence! Anyone hoping to best us will have to get through me!"

You rushed over here just to tell me that?

I knew Rasantark meant well and had worked tirelessly while I slept, but was that truly all he had come to say? There was a certain charm in his earnestness, but in this case, it was only holding him back.

"I recognize and appreciate all you've done for me, Rasantark, but please remember to coordinate with my guard knights. Ditter cannot be played alone. If you hope to be not just a knight

following orders but a leader in our upcoming match, you must stay mindful of your allies' needs—and their frustrations.”

The apprentice knight blinked in confusion. “What frustrations?”

“The duty of protecting me falls to my knights, whether Father chose you as my suitor or not. Why, then, are my brother’s retainers making all the major decisions themselves? You must be careful; things are no longer as they were when he was here.”

Not long ago, my brother had been the highest authority in the dormitory. My opinions had been ignored, and it had been natural for him and his retainers to decide everything. Now, however, that authority rested with me. By failing to recognize that, Rasantark was effectively presenting himself as superior to an archduke candidate.

That he remains unaware is just as troubling.

He had earned my retainers’ resentment to such a degree that some now viewed Raufereg as the preferable suitor—yet he still seemed oblivious to having done anything wrong. Such ignorance was far from ideal.

Though perhaps it was inevitable, given how many people are involved.

Rasantark had angered my retainers, yet the other apprentice knights behaved as though his conduct were perfectly normal. Chastising him the moment I awoke was bound to ruffle a few feathers.

“Save such thoughts for later, Rasantark. You came to escort Lady Hannelore, did you not?” Kenntrips interjected as he approached. He then offered me his hand and smiled as though seeing me awake for the first time. “I am glad to see you in good health, Lady Hannelore. Forgive me—I failed to assist you that day, though I was there in the gazebo with you.”

I returned his smile, careful not to let him see how much his earlier courting still flustered me. “Think nothing of it. No one could be expected to defy a goddess for my sake.”

Oh no... I can't even look at him! Those memories keep surfacing on their own!

I stared down at my feet, doing my utmost to appear calm as my two suitors escorted me to my seat. Cordula’s stare burned holes in me the entire way.

Please don't lecture me! I know an archduke candidate must keep

her head held high, but what else am I supposed to do?!

Our food had already been served by the time Raufereg entered the dining hall. He must have come straight from a meeting; his retainers were still whispering among themselves.

I expect he'll approach me now that he considers himself my suitor, but not until after we've eaten. Surely his business isn't so urgent as to interrupt a meal.

Thinking about the future made my head ache, so I focused on my food instead. It was a mild soup with bread on the side—appropriate for my first meal in ten days. I brought a spoonful to my lips.

How bland... I wish I could eat the same food as everyone else.

I was solemnly picking at my bread when Cordula's sharp voice cut through the room. "That seat is not for you, Lord Raufereg." Startled, I looked up to find him much closer than expected.

"Ah, Lady Hannelore!" he exclaimed. "My very own goddess!"

E-Excuse me...?

As I stared at him, speechless, Raufereg extended his hand with theatrical flourish. What in the world was he doing? I could tell at a glance that he was utterly self-absorbed; though his purple eyes were fixed on me, it felt as though he were looking straight through me. He seemed positively bewitched by the Goddess of Chaos, which only made me warier.

"Take my hand, I implore you, so that together we might—"

"I am trying to eat," I said. "If you wish to speak with me, save it for later. Your objective is not unknown to me."

His intrusion without so much as a greeting was deeply unsettling. He could at least have noticed how tense my retainers had grown. I leveled a glare at him—only to freeze as he suddenly clutched his chest and groaned.

"Wh...?"

"Milady! Your divine power is intensifying!" Cordula cried in alarm. "You must control it! You're *Crushing* Lord Raufereg!"

Kenntrips and Rasantark rose at once, their expressions equally grave.

"But this power isn't mine," I said. "I don't know *how* to control it."

The goddess's strength surged within me, moving in a way my mana never had. In that instant, its grip on Raufereg loosened, and he managed to gasp for breath.

Cordula exhaled in relief, then cast him a scathing look. “Lord Raufereg—step away from Lady Hannelore. No one else who approached her today suffered such consequences. It would seem the goddess’s power does not tolerate rudeness during meals.”

Having declared himself my ally, Raufereg could hardly afford another public rejection by the goddess’s power. He clicked his tongue but relented, letting his retainers steer him back to his usual seat.

“I see now why those in Ehrenfest and Alexandria spoke of divine power with such concern,” Cordula murmured. “When they said it made daily life difficult, I didn’t know what to expect.”

“Indeed,” I agreed. “We must find a way to manage it.” I had dismissed it as harmless before, but I couldn’t risk Crushing more people against my will.

“I have already informed Alexandria that you have awakened and that we wish to discuss this matter with them,” Cordula said. “I shall arrange a date for our meeting at once.”

I thanked my ever-reliable head attendant, then listened to my other retainers’ reports while finishing my soup. Once I’d eaten, I turned to face the gathered students in the dining hall. It was vital that I reunify the dormitory.

“After the Goddess of Time descended into my body, I fell into a deep sleep that caused you all great concern,” I began. “For that, I offer my sincerest apologies. My retainers have informed me that several duchies have now challenged us to *ditter*.”

For reasons beyond my understanding, my announcement was met with loud cheers. Several students even began chanting “*ditter*.”

“Who’s gonna win?!” one student roared.

“WE ARE!”

“Who’s gonna keep Lady Hannelore safe?!”

“WE ARE!”

“Who’s gonna make her the next aub?!”

“WE ARE!!!”

“NOT SO!” another shouted. “We are *not* making Lady Hannelore the next aub!”

“HURRAAAH!”

Even when faced with two entirely contrasting declarations, the students’ battle cries remained equally impassioned.

I can’t get through to them at all. Whatever shall I do?

"This is no time to be dazed, milady," Cordula warned. "If you don't intervene now, support for your becoming the next aub will only continue to grow."

I looked up with a start. Raufereg's and Rasantark's groups held opposing views, yet they were working themselves into a joint frenzy. I was the only one who could stop them.

"Silence!" I cried. "Though I have every confidence we will claim victory, I have never wished to become the next aub. Let me make this clear: We are accepting the other duchies' challenges *only* as a means of rejecting their demands."

Raufereg, his retainers, and everyone else clamoring for my ascension froze mid-cheer. Then came the protests.

"But... what will become of Lord Raufereg's proposal?!"

"As a divine avatar, you're best suited to be the next aub!"

"Lord Raufereg is ready to relinquish the seat entirely for your sake!"

I gazed quizzically at Raufereg's supporters, who seemed more desperate by the moment. "When he proposed to me, I refused him. What made you think the goddess's descent would change my mind?"

Cordula had warned me that my first rejection might not have been clear enough for students of our duchy to grasp. This time, I intended to leave no room for doubt.

"You say he would give up the seat of aub for my sake, but I never wanted it to begin with," I continued, exposing the fatal flaw in their reasoning. "Besides, women are expected to marry before the age of twenty—and since Raufereg is four years my junior, I would already have passed that point by the time he comes of age. What could he possibly offer that would make waiting worthwhile?"

Raufereg's supporters flapped their mouths in shock. Women had only a brief window in which they were considered ideal for marriage, making unions with younger men notoriously difficult to arrange. Men, by contrast, remained eligible regardless of age.

"And that isn't the only problem," I continued. "Raufereg has made his intentions perfectly clear—he means to foist the duties of aub upon me so that he can devote himself to true ditter. He would be unfit as either the aub or the aub's partner."

Several girls in the crowd murmured their agreement, pointing out that his proposal was both poorly thought-out and transparently

self-serving.

“If you wish to become the next aub, then train until you can defeat my brother on your own merits,” I concluded. “But do not involve me in your selfish ambitions. I have no desire to spend my life with someone who has no intention of protecting me.”

Raufereg gritted his teeth, rejection written plain across his face. “Of course I’d protect you! I’d win every single ditter match I played!”

So stupefying was his arrogance that my noble facade slipped, and disbelief broke through. “I think not. You are so unreliable that I wouldn’t trust you to guard my back in battle, let alone feel safe in your protection.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?!” Raufereg barked. He lunged toward me, ready to come to blows, but Kenntrips caught him by the cape before he could get close. Rasantark was just as quick, grabbing the unruly archduke candidate and flinging him aside.

“Come, Lord Raufereg. Let’s continue this at the training grounds,” Rasantark said coolly. “We have words to exchange about your behavior toward Lady Hannelore.”

“Rasantark is correct,” Kenntrips added. “The dining hall is no place for such conduct. If your retainers haven’t taught you that much, we’ll be glad to remedy the oversight.”

Each seized one of Raufereg’s arms, ready to drag him out by force. As exasperating as his antics were, even I had to admit they were taking things a little too far.

“Cordula,” I said.

“Enough, you two,” she interjected. “In Lord Lestilaut’s absence, either of you ‘educating’ Lord Raufereg would be a breach of status. The archducal couple have insisted the task fall to Lady Hannelore. Now come along, all of you.”

Cordula set off at a brisk trot, leaving no room for argument. I hurried to keep pace, with Raufereg, his retainers, Rasantark, and Kenntrips trailing behind.

“Um, Cordula...” I whispered, “since when is this *my* responsibility?”

Her thin smile did nothing to soften the fire in her red eyes. “You are the only archduke candidate present, and therefore the only one who can educate him. Take this chance to break what remains of his spirit. Instill in him the qualities an aub must have, so he never again tries to use you for his own convenience.”

Ngh... How terrifying.

If I held back, I would be on the receiving end of Cordula's wrath. My abilities as an archduke candidate were being tested once again.

"Lady Hannelore, what did you mean when you called me unreliable?!"

No sooner had we reached the training grounds than Raufereg rounded on me. His shock at being thrown aside had transformed into fury.

"Was it not clear? You are a first-year who has just learned to form a highbeast and take part in ditter. If you think you would see great success in bride-stealing ditter, you are sorely mistaken. You could not even beat me."

"You think I'd lose to you?!"

My attempt to speak plainly only angered Raufereg further. His face turned a blazing red, and he drew a magic tool in the shape of a sword. The strength with which he launched toward me, the speed of his swing, and the glint in his purple eyes made it clear how well trained in combat he was.

"Geteilt!"

"Guh!"

Raufereg cried out as his blow struck my shield. He was wide open, so I snatched one of the defensive magic tools I wore as an accessory and threw it at him. The tool wasn't particularly dangerous; at most, it would temporarily blind him, buying me some time.

Though even a few extra moments can prove invaluable on the battlefield.

Raufereg toppled over, and I pressed home my advantage, turning my schtappe from a shield to a staff and thrusting it at him. One point to me.

"GUH!"

"An attack must land to have meaning," I said.

I would have liked our clash to end there, but Raufereg seemed intent to continue. He picked up his weapon, incensed, and scrambled to his feet. Then he approached me again—slower this time, eyeing my hands as if wary of another magic tool.

"Do you understand what it means to proclaim that you wish to participate in true ditter?" I asked. "Are you not allowing your

admiration to outpace your understanding of what ditter actually is?”

My next attack came from my ring—a shapeless burst of mana. It was only ever used as an insult against foes one deemed well and truly beneath oneself.

“Don’t mock me!” Raufereg shouted, having taken the jab about as poorly as expected. He swung at my mana, then grinned triumphantly as his sword cut straight through it. It was a hollow victory; barely a moment later, my staff caught him in the flank. Another point to me.



“True ditter is a battle to the death over duchy foundations,” I said. “Do you know what people would think about the archducal family of a greater duchy shamelessly declaring their love for it?”

Raufereg rose to his feet again, sword still in hand. His determination was admirable, but he failed to recognize the basic truth of the situation: As strong as he might be for his age, I had trained far, far longer. Anyone as stubborn as he was would surely fail to identify when to retreat in ditter.

“To begin with, you and your retainers seem to glorify true ditter, but I only took part to clear my name. I was not there to become the next aub, or because I yearned for an achievement that would put me on equal standing with my brother.”

I paired my lecture with another swift strike, using the butt of my staff to shatter the rejuvenation potion Raufereg had attempted to drink. I did not intend to stay long, so an extension on our battle was the last thing I wanted.

No longer able to heal, Raufereg resorted to an all-out attack. He leveled his sword at me and charged.

“I certainly hope you aren’t so naive as to think a good offense is all that matters,” I said. “If you truly wish to participate in true ditter, you must first understand the importance of defense. An archduke’s most crucial duty is protecting their duchy and treasure. The knights attack for them, serving as pieces on the archduke’s board. In the true ditter match you admire so much, I was a piece on the board, while my brother defended the foundation.”

Before setting out for the Sovereignty, Father had tasked my brother with protecting the foundation as the acting archduke. If my brother had not been deemed worthy, the role would have gone to our uncle instead.

“I joined a squabble between duchies that evolved into a war between Ehrenfest and Ahrensbach. Such was the extent of my role. My brother, in contrast, was entrusted with our foundation, and the fact he successfully defended it is more meaningful in terms of who is a worthy aub.”

Raufereg was fast, but his attacks were easy to read; I casually knocked yet another strike aside with my shield. The rage in his expression had vanished, replaced with panic and frustration. He seemed to have realized he didn’t stand a chance.

"Is it not about time to acknowledge your defeat?" I asked.

"Defeat? My resolve is stronger than ever! I'll win here and take you as my wife!"

"Do you really consider yourself a match for my brother? Even now, you fail to see how outmatched you are!"

I swung my shield to knock away Raufereg's sword, then transformed it back into a schtappe and restrained him with bands of light. He fell to the ground with a dull thud.

"I will not free you until you admit defeat," I said.

"I mean it! I'm enamored with your strength! Forget being the next aub; I'll win you over, no matter what!"

Come again...?

I merely looked down at him, having not expected his confession. Even as he writhed in his bindings, strangely reminiscent of a worm, his purple eyes sparkled with excitement. I hadn't thought he could get any more off-putting.

"Come, Lady Hannelore. Pay him no mind."

Kenntrips and Rasantark rushed over to separate us, both wearing frowns.

"Um... Forgive my ignorance, but what is going on, exactly?" I asked the pair. "Am I the only one who cannot see how this bizarre change came about? Were there warning signs I overlooked?"

"Your passionate lesson lit a flame in him," Kenntrips said, squeezing his eyes shut and pinching the bridge of his nose.

"Now he wants you, not simply the status of being the next aub," Rasantark added with a grimace. "How do you intend to remedy this? I expect him to be just as obstinate as Lord Heisshitze going forward."

I wished they wouldn't look at me as if I were to blame. Not even the gods themselves could have predicted this outcome.

"This was not my intention..." I muttered. Something told me that in the world of the gods, the Goddess of Binding was cackling at my expense.

Exchanging Intelligence with Alexandria

“Lady Hannelore, we have received a reply from Alexandria,” Andrea announced, board in hand. “Despite the suddenness, they have asked whether you could meet them tomorrow afternoon. What do you think?”

I accepted the board and read the message. It concerned the tea party Cordula had been so eager to arrange for the sake of exchanging information.

“Yes, it is rather sudden,” I said, “but I suspect they requested a meeting on such short notice because we informed them I cannot attend classes until we learn how to manage my divine power. Moreover, Alexandria was founded not even a year ago. Their aub being absent by the order of a goddess must have left them deeply unsettled. I don’t mind the urgency if it benefits us both.”

From my perspective, there was no reason to refuse. I was desperate to learn how to deal with my divine power, which seemed to Crush others at the slightest provocation, and to hear how Lady Rozemyne had spent her time while burdened by the same affliction.

“I understand,” Andrea said. “Alexandria has also requested that Lady Letizia be permitted to attend. Would that be acceptable?”

I pondered the question. Lady Rozemyne was still absent, which made Lady Letizia Alexandria’s one and only archduke candidate. The disappearance of her benefactor, coupled with her ties to Old Ahrensbach, must have put her under even sharper scrutiny than usual.

“She must be in a difficult position...” I mused. “I know her personally, so it might put her more at ease to know nothing has changed between us. But at the same time, I know not what might have changed in Lady Rozemyne’s absence.”

My own absence had lasted a mere ten days, yet it had been

long enough for several of my retainers to side with Raufereg. For a girl in Lady Letizia's position, things must have been far worse.

"Indeed," Andrea agreed. "Who knows how the Old Ahrensbach nobles might be trying to capitalize on the current situation."

"If this request came from Lady Rozemyne's retainers, not from Lady Letizia herself, then I agree to her joining."

"Understood. I shall convey your thoughts to Alexandria and ask that Lady Rozemyne's retainers reach an agreement among themselves."

On that note, Andrea left, and Cordula came in as if to replace her. I had asked my head attendant to bring me whatever reports had arrived from Dunkelfelger in my absence, yet her hands were empty.

"I do apologize, milady, but I must ask that you come to the meeting room."

"Is there a problem?" I asked.

"It turns out Lord Raufereg hid many of the reports. We are moving them to a meeting room so that Kenntrips and the others can go over them as well."

"Excuse me?!" I exclaimed. "What on earth was he thinking?!" The dunce had purposefully concealed reports so that no one else would see them.

"It was an act of spite toward Lord Lestilaut's retainers, which Lord Raufereg tried to justify with his status as an archduke candidate. I suspect it was the only way he could think to demonstrate any level of superiority." Clearly irritated, Cordula briskly gathered up the documents I was looking over, including the Alexandrian invitation, and put them in a box. "Lord Raufereg's interests lie primarily in dither, so he ignored all but the most critical reports. Many of them remain unread. There is much cleaning up for us to do."

"Something is seriously wrong with that boy..."

We had expected to be debriefed on reports that had already been processed in my absence. Instead, we suddenly had ten days' worth of business to attend to. It was no wonder Cordula had arranged a meeting room; the matter was too great for my female apprentice scholars to handle alone.

I rose to my feet with a deep sigh. It seemed my work would involve far more than simply looking over summaries.

As soon as I arrived at the meeting room, a box of correspondence was set in front of me. It was larger than the box we usually kept letters in and apparently contained nothing but invitations from other duchies that had arrived while I was asleep. I resisted the urge to avert my eyes from the mountain of messages and instead separated them into piles based on whether I would or wouldn't accept them.

"Andrea," I said, "I refuse to attend all tea parties with duchies that challenged us to bride-stealing ditto. Send them suitable letters of rejection. I owe nothing to those who see me as a divine avatar above all else."

"Understood."

I exhaled and scanned the meeting room. My brother's and my apprentice scholars were working through the backlog of reports. Raufereg had to be an abject fool to have withheld correspondence from our home duchy for the sake of faux superiority, and his retainers were just as bad for enabling him.

"Lady Hannelore, this report appears to be of particular importance," my apprentice scholar Luitpold said. "A smattering of adult knights claim to have recalled memories from their time at the Royal Academy—and they insist Lady Rozemyne was in them."

"Show me at once!"

I took the report and read through it. Each of the knights had attended the Academy alongside Lord Ferdinand, and they all reported having lost their memories of three days in particular. Those memories had since returned, only they all insisted they had seen Lady Rozemyne—as she looked now, no less. The report was dated three days before my return from the world of the gods.

The days these knights remember must be the period the Goddess of Time said was repaired.

I would never have imagined that signs of Lady Rozemyne's progress would appear in such a fashion. A rush of emotion surged through me as I thought about her trials and triumphs.

Still, to think knights of Dunkelfelger lost their memories...

"Lady Hannelore, this report expands upon the issue using information Lady Sieglinde gathered during her inquiry."

I took the report from Elusia and immediately wanted to pull my hair out. Apparently, the incident had taken place over a decade ago. Knights of Dunkelfelger had gone gathering with Lord Ferdinand of Ehrenfest, and while they had returned with the

ingredients they sought, not one of them remembered getting them. In fact, they had no memory of the trip whatsoever. That was bizarre enough, but the knights hadn't even cared; they had all concluded that, as they had gotten what they needed, there was nothing for them to worry about.

Is that not an absurdly casual response to an entire group of people losing their memory?

It was far from the first time I found myself unable to empathize with our duchy's knights. The real point of interest was what Lady Rozemyne had actually done in the past. I pored over the records and the knights' recollections contained within.

"Had Raufereg not hidden this report, we could have informed Alexandria much sooner..." I said, anger rising within me.

"I suspect they already know," Cordula noted with a half-smile. "If Lord Ferdinand participated in that hunt, he would surely have regained his memories as well."

"True..."

Lord Ferdinand had a spectacular memory, from what I could tell. He surely remembered every detail of Lady Rozemyne's arrival—which was more than our knights could say—and promptly shared what he knew with her worried retainers.

"Still, I am glad we learned this before tomorrow's tea party. We would have seemed utterly ignorant and incompetent otherwise," I said. "Is Raufereg not going to be punished?"

"We need only keep unprocessed reports out of his hands. For now, I would advise you continue avoiding him as much as you can."

I nodded. After his concerning response at the training grounds, I could not bear to be anywhere near him.

By the time of our scheduled tea party with Alexandria, my divine power had faded considerably. My attendants could still sense it, but I couldn't feel it myself, and Cordula maintained it would be entirely gone in a day or two.

"You know, Cordula," I said as we made our way to the meeting room, "at this point, I don't really have much to ask of Alexandria, do I?"

"You should ask for their advice nonetheless. Even if you no longer feel the divine power, there might be long-term effects to navigate."

Soon enough, we reached the location of Alexandria's tea party. Most students were in class, so the halls were quiet, and I didn't have many of my retainers with me. Cordula rang a bell outside the door to announce our arrival, and Lieseleta, Lady Rozemyne's head attendant, promptly came to welcome us. Behind her, I saw Lady Letizia and those I assumed to be her retainers.

"Lady Hannelore, I thank you ever so much for accepting our sudden invitation," Lieseleta said.

"Think nothing of it. You must be busy yourselves, so I appreciate your making time to meet with us."

I exchanged greetings with the head attendant as I entered the room. Lady Letizia timidly approached and greeted me with a smile, betraying the awkwardness and anxiety expected of a first-year unaccustomed to socializing.

"Lady Hannelore, I thank you ever so much for letting me participate today."

Lieseleta watched with kind eyes. If Lady Rozemyne's retainers had wanted Lady Letizia to attend, I doubted Alexandria's dormitory had fractured in its absence.

"You are in a difficult position, Lady Letizia, having to keep your dormitory unified while Lady Rozemyne is away. And as a first-year, no less. I can imagine how uneasy you must feel. Only after my brother's graduation did I learn just how exhausting that endeavor can be. I pray this tea party supports you in your efforts."

"Your consideration is much appreciated."

We were shown to our seats, and tea was prepared at once. Lieseleta and Lady Letizia were the only ones to join us at the table. They each took a sip of tea and a bite of the served sweets to show they were safe.

"Etiquette dictates we save our more serious topics of conversation for after we have enjoyed our tea, but allow me to jump ahead," Lieseleta said apologetically. "The divine power must be taking quite the toll on your body."

I started. My muscles had atrophied somewhat during my ten-day slumber, but two days of exercise had set me right as rain. I was already back to joining the others for morning training. The burden on my body wasn't bad enough for someone of another duchy to worry for my sake.

"Is divine power a physical burden?" I asked. "I do not feel particularly ill—perhaps because it had mostly faded by the time I

awoke.”

“Oh my. Is that so?” Lieseleta blinked her dark-green eyes in surprise.

“Indeed. I was barely even aware that I was glowing faintly. My one concern is going outside, as even a small stir in my emotions risks me inadvertently Crushing someone.”

Lieseleta placed a contemplative hand on her cheek. “Your experience differs greatly from Lady Rozemyne’s, then. Her divine power refused to fade, and caring for her was a strenuous task indeed. In the early days, even her archattendants had a hard time caring for her; simply touching her hair or skin caused their hands to shake violently. Medattendants could not even get close. We had to wrap her in mana-blocking silver cloth to get anything done. Was that not the case for you?”

Her final question was directed not at me, but at the attendants in my service. Cordula explained that my condition had never been bad enough for their hands to tremble, which put Lieseleta more at ease.

“In that case, I doubt you have much to worry about. As the divine power continues to fade, Lady Hannelore should come closer and closer to normalcy. Lady Rozemyne’s mana even returned to its original color once she expelled the last of the goddess’s influence from her body.”

Cordula and I placed hands on our chests, relieved. If all we had to do was wait, my life would return to normal soon enough.

“Then it truly is as I said, Cordula. I merely lent my body to a goddess who wished to summon Lady Rozemyne. The gods do not depend on me as they do on her. I am no divine avatar as she is.”

“We truly do apologize for that,” Lieseleta interjected—much to my surprise.

“Hmm? Um...”

“It was because Lady Rozemyne left the Royal Academy that the gods found it necessary to summon you. Before her departure, she expressed worry for what might become of you—and as she feared, many suitors have troubled Dunkelfelger for your hand in marriage. We sincerely apologize.”

Lady Letizia faltered, then apologized as well.

“The deluge of proposals I received certainly inconvenienced us, but I do not blame Alexandria or Lady Rozemyne,” I said. “No one could have predicted the intervention of the gods themselves.”

“But—”

“Furthermore, had the Goddess of Time given up on summoning Lady Rozemyne, I suspect the outcome would have been far, far worse.” Dregarnuhr had only bothered to act because Wentuchte the Goddess of Weaving was particularly fond of her most recent creation. If not for that, twenty whole years of history might have been erased. “My situation can hardly be compared to Alexandria losing its aub. I have many more people I can rely upon.”

Lieseleta cast her eyes down, trying to hide her vexation. “I was ordered to aid you as much as I could, Lady Hannelore... yet we are so preoccupied with our own duchy that I fear there is nothing we can do.”

As the Alexandrians continued to apologize, I was overcome with guilt. As it stood, my main concern wasn’t the swarm of proposals we’d received from other duchies but our own Raufereg. His sudden infatuation with me and decision to hide important reports had nothing to do with the goddess’s summons.

“Please rest assured,” I said.

Lieseleta looked up at me, eyes wide, and gave a quiet “Oh?”

I smiled to console her. “You have nothing to worry about; the other duchies stand no chance of beating Dunkelfelger in ditter.” On the odd occasion, I supposed our duchy’s obsession actually worked to our advantage.

“I see. I shall inform Lady Rozemyne when she returns.”

To my surprise, Lieseleta’s expression became more strained than relaxed. She tried to mask it with a smile, but I could tell she was concerned.

Hmm? Was it something I said?

As I wrestled with my confusion, Lady Letizia leaned closer to me. “I apologize for asking this—we have troubled you enough already—but might you know anything about Lady Rozemyne’s current status?”

I was startled. The true purpose of our tea party, the exchange of intelligence, had completely slipped my mind. Lieseleta’s eyes sharpened as well.

“Forgive me, but I only know so much. Because only my conscious mind was summoned, I could not stay in the world of the gods for long. I was told my body would deteriorate. Might I ask what Alexandria knows already?”

Lieseleta produced sound-blockers and gave one each to Lady Letizia and me. "Please keep what we are about to discuss a secret, even from your own duchy. It is a significant concern for us, considering Alexandria's present instability."

"Of course," I said. "I do not share what I learned in the world of the gods lightly. There is much I have not told my duchy and cannot tell you. Such matters are best saved for Lady Rozemyne's return, once we have had a chance to consult with the Zent."

It would be one thing to discuss the severing of Lord Ferdinand's thread and the potential erasure of twenty full years of history. The more intimate details, however—that his thread had to be bound with Lady Rozemyne's to repair it, and that the God of Stars had been summoned for that purpose—would need to be saved for Lady Rozemyne's return, when we could decide how much to make public.

Considering the stir that has arisen merely from a goddess borrowing my body for a short time, who knows what might happen if the true extent of Lady Rozemyne's involvement with the gods becomes known?

Lieseleta received my words with a cautious nod, then squeezed her part of the sound-blocker. "We of Alexandria believe the goddess's summons was the result of a strange occurrence with Lord Ferdinand."

The head attendant explained that, back in Alexandria, Lord Ferdinand had suddenly lost consciousness and then began to quite literally fade away. Naturally, upon hearing the news, Lady Rozemyne returned to the duchy to check on him.

"I returned with her," Lieseleta continued. "We found Lord Ferdinand in his bed, barely even visible apart from a faint outline. It was clearly not a disease, but a supernatural phenomenon. Lady Rozemyne was preparing magic tools and such to consult the gods when she received your urgent summons to the Royal Academy."

Lady Rozemyne had readied what she could and departed immediately. If she had seen Lord Ferdinand's condition with her own eyes, I could understand her lack of hesitation, but the fact she had already been preparing to consult the gods when she was summoned still seemed rather strange to me.

"That is all Alexandria knows," Lieseleta concluded. "We have not heard from Lady Rozemyne since her departure for the world of the gods, nor have we gained any new intelligence." She looked at

me imploringly. "Could you tell us more?"

"I know the cause of the anomaly you speak of. The Goddess of Time told us Lord Ferdinand's thread had been severed. Because his actions shaped Yurgenschmidt so profoundly, more than twenty years of history woven by the Goddess of Weaving were on the verge of collapse."

Lieseleta and Lady Letizia both stared at me, mouths agape. Their expressions conveyed a complete and utter lack of understanding.

"Lord Ferdinand's thread, history woven by a goddess..." It was clear from the look on Lieseleta's face that she was struggling to wrap her head around things. "I do not know what to say except that the situation seems dire indeed."

Lady Letizia blinked, equally confused. "From the start, Lady Rozemyne insisted the gods were involved. Was she truly correct?"

I understood exactly how they felt; the affairs of the gods were too strange to take at face value. But if even they were shaken, despite knowing Lord Ferdinand's condition, how absurd would the full truth seem to everyone else?

"The gods summoned Lady Rozemyne to restore Lord Ferdinand's thread and prevent Yurgenschmidt from losing its recent history. As I was leaving, I was told she had succeeded in one step of those repairs."

"Is that so?"

My companions' faces lit up at the news.

"Indeed," I said. "As I am sure Ehrenfest and Alexandria already know, she was sent back in time to when Lord Ferdinand was a student at the Royal Academy." He had been an archduke candidate, so several of Ehrenfest's knights must have accompanied him on his trip. Even if Lord Ferdinand himself remained unconscious, his retainers at the time would remember.

Or so I thought.

Lady Letizia frowned. "This is news to Alexandria. Were you aware, Lieseleta?"

"I was not, and neither is Ehrenfest."

I tilted my head in confusion. I doubted they were lying, or that someone in Alexandria or Ehrenfest was hiding reports as Raufereg had.

"Several of our knights claimed to suddenly recall memories of that time," I said. "They insisted they were out gathering with Lord

Ferdinand when Lady Rozemyne arrived. I assume his guard knights at the time have regained their memories as well.”

“Perhaps those knights are in Ehrenfest,” Lady Letizia mused, her face tinged with concern.

Lieseleta gave a troubled smile. “In truth, Lord Ferdinand’s trusted retainers lost consciousness as well, perhaps because of their close proximity to him. Though unlike Lord Ferdinand, they are not fading away.”

Alexandria was in an even worse state than I expected.

“May I ask how Lady Rozemyne is doing?” the head attendant asked. “I know there is much you cannot tell us, but anything will do.”

“I was not with her when she returned to the past,” I said. “The most I can do is relay what the knights told me.”

Well, what they told Mother, but there’s no need to specify that.

As the pair watched me with hopeful eyes, I started to explain the contents of the report.

“The knights were gathering their ingredients when a *ternisbefallen* appeared. Unfamiliar with the beast, they attacked it with reckless abandon, causing it to grow. It was then that Lady Rozemyne descended, granted them black weaponry, and worked with Lord Ferdinand to slay it.”

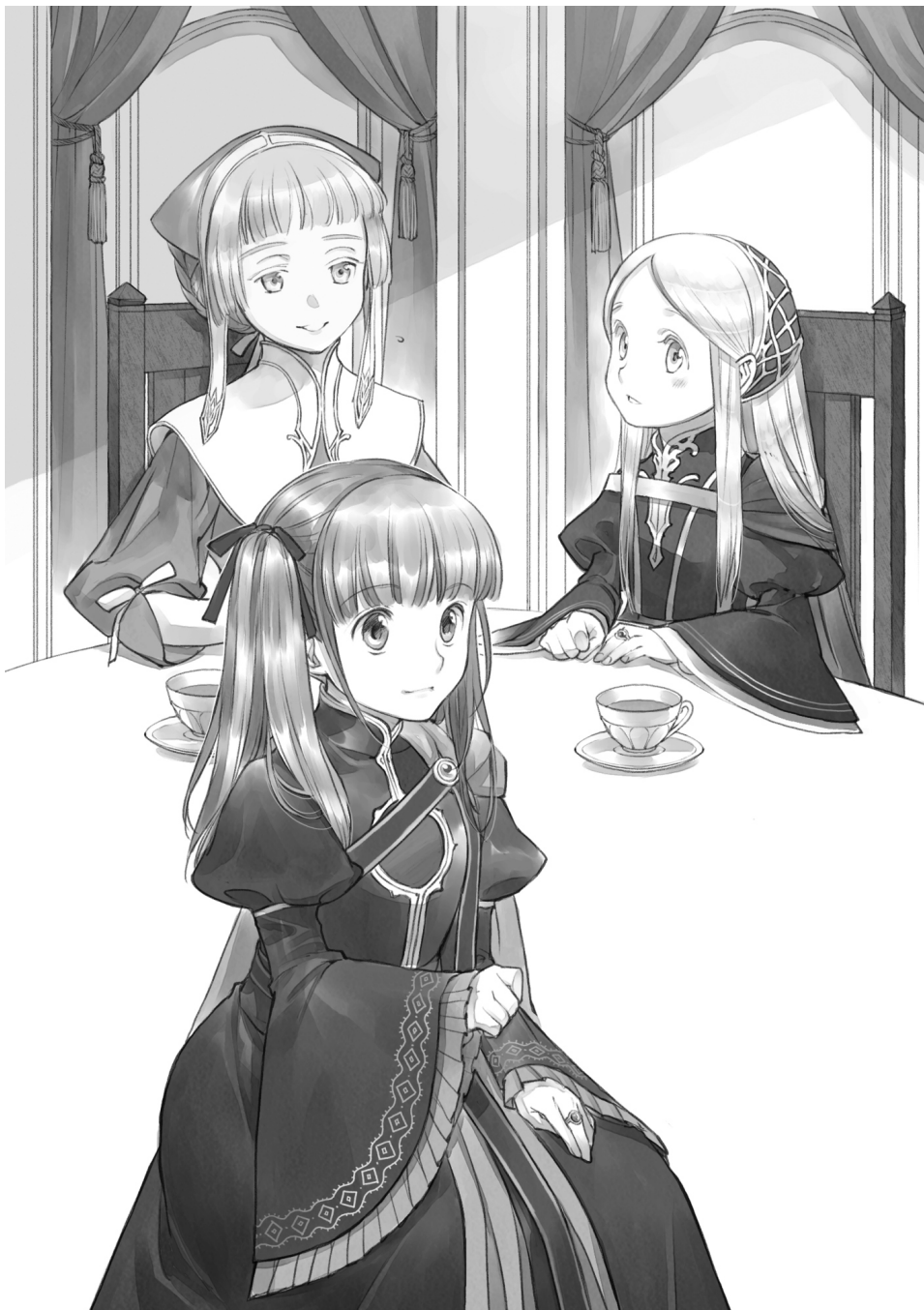
“A *ternisbefallen*? As in, one of the same feybeasts used in the attack on the awards ceremony three years ago?” Lieseleta asked, searching through her memories. “It might have posed a threat without black weaponry, but with it...”

“The battle was not difficult in the least,” I said. “Once the beast was slain, Lady Rozemyne insisted on healing everyone’s wounds. Lord Ferdinand refused—but as his injuries worsened, Lady Rozemyne healed him regardless.”

“Yes, I can imagine him refusing help from someone he does not recognize,” Lieseleta said.

“Lady Rozemyne’s behavior was just as predictable,” Letizia agreed. “She would have healed Lord Ferdinand no matter how much he protested.”

Wry smiles arose on their worried faces. They knew Lord Ferdinand and Lady Rozemyne better than I, meaning they could extrapolate more from Mother’s report.



“The healing was performed inside Lady Rozemyne’s highbeast, so our knights could not elaborate,” I said, continuing my explanation. “I was told she was taken back to the world of the gods after he recovered. That is as much as Dunkelfelger knows.” Mother’s report had been written on a wooden board, so it wasn’t particularly detailed.

“She was taken back to the world of the gods?” Lieseleta repeated.

“Does that mean she was successful?” Letizia asked.

“Indeed,” I said with a smile. “We received this report four days ago. Knowing Lady Rozemyne, she could already be close to finishing the second part of her mission.”

Lady Letizia placed a hand on her chest and sighed. “Lady Rozemyne will surely be fine. I am certain she will succeed in her endeavors and return to us safely. Lady Hannelore, I thank you ever so much for what you have told us.”

Lieseleta nodded in agreement, her lips curved in a smile and her eyes wet with tears. “Your news of Lady Rozemyne’s success reassures me that she will save Lord Ferdinand. Our dormitory and duchy will surely settle down after hearing this. I thank you from the bottom of my heart.”

Thus concluded my tea party with Alexandria.

“Once the glow of your divine power fades completely, you should have no trouble returning to your classes,” Cordula said as we departed. “That gives us a day or two, yes? Let us use this time to study.”

Summons from the Zent

The day after my meeting with Alexandria, I got to work studying with Cordula. I was holed up in my room while most other students were in class.

“You seem well enough to return to your classes tomorrow,” said my head attendant. “I have been informed that not even laynobles feel divine power within you anymore.”

“How wonderful. I was starting to feel restless.” Since returning from the world of the gods, I had stayed mostly in my room to avoid troubling my retainers or anyone else, leaving me with a staggering amount of idle time.

I was still processing the good news when a white bird made an entrance. It flew a lap of the room before perching on my wrist.

“Lady Hannelore, this is Zent Eglantine.”

My back straightened on instinct.

“I, too, wish to be updated on the goddess’s descent and Lady Rozemyne’s current situation,” the ordonnanz continued, relaying its message from the Zent herself. “I ask that we speak, in private, before you return to your classes and mingle with the other duchies. Does tomorrow morning suit your schedule?”

The little bird repeated its message twice more before turning back into a yellow feystone. I caught it and tilted my head.

“How does the Zent know I’m awake?”

“She took such great interest in the goddess’s descent that Kenntrips and the others received summons simply for being there,” Cordula noted. “Of course she wants to hear from someone who spoke with the gods themselves. I sent her word of your awakening at the same time I informed Alexandria.”

My breath caught in my throat; my head attendant was too capable for my own good. Though I understood the importance of reporting to the Zent, the very thought of going to the palace made me anxious. I clutched my stomach and groaned, inspiring a look of exasperation from Cordula.

“Breathe, Lady Hannelore. Yesterday’s tea party taught you

what to say and what others will want to know, did it not? You and Lady Rozemyne were the only ones invited to the world of the gods; there is nobody else Zent Eglantine can turn to.”

“Yes, but... she said we would speak *in private*,” I said, already on the verge of tears. “Won’t she send you out of the room?” Facing the Zent alone was well and truly beyond me.

Cordula gave a cold nod. “Clearly, she intends to keep the particulars of the matter from reaching the public. She even arranged your meeting for tomorrow morning, when Lord Anastasius will be busy.”

“True... He should be teaching the archduke candidate course around then. I did not think my report would be that confidential... Should we send word to Father and the others?” It was customary to inform one’s home duchy of such a crucial summons, and they would surely want to advise me on how to act.

“I see no reason not to. They have already been told what happened in the world of the gods.”

Evidently, Cordula had passed along the information I had shared with her and everything that had come up during our tea party with Alexandria. But there was plenty I was keeping to myself.

A full report will need to wait until after Lady Rozemyne returns and we’ve had a chance to reconvene.

Lord Ferdinand and two decades of history were at risk of being erased, and only Lady Rozemyne could save them. Revealing the full truth of the matter would only incite mass panic, so I intended to keep it from everyone, including my home duchy.

“Furthermore,” Cordula said, “as important as this divine business might be...”

She paused, the furrow in her brow betraying hesitation. I gestured for her to continue.

“When you meet with the Zent, I would advise you to speak about the contest for your hand in marriage. Thoroughly. Even compared to other forms, bride-stealing ditter is unique, and there is no precedent for it being used on such a large scale.”

Men issued challenges to bride-taking ditter when they had already won the affection of the woman they wished to wed. Bride-stealing ditter, in contrast, was played to secure a woman whose father had already chosen her fiancé. In both cases, the battle was waged between the woman’s family and the potential groom’s—but

several men, let alone men from different duchies, issuing challenges for the same woman at the same time was anything but normal. Not even in Dunkelfelger, where people lived and breathed ditler, had such a thing happened before.

The title of “divine avatar” is just that attractive, I suppose.

Only after my encounter with the goddess had this battle for my affection begun. Everyone was interested not in me but in my new status.

“If there are misconceptions at play here—as there were with Ehrenfest—it could lead to grave consequences,” my head attendant cautioned. “Therefore, we must ensure that the other duchies understand our customs, and that the Zent’s perspective is brought into accord with our own.”

“I trust the Zent understands our customs well enough, but it could not hurt to be sure. We would not want to make the same mistake again.”

Lestilaut might not have been here to conceal information from me and Ehrenfest to manipulate the situation in his favor, but there was an even more chaotic element at play. My brother had at least overseen important matters of the duchy. Raufereg would only cause problems and would thus need to be kept under close watch.

“For as long as men obsess over ditler, women will need to keep eyes on them,” I said. “That was what Mother taught me.” Whether I could take the reins as expertly as she had was yet to be seen, but she had told me to at least try my best. “Very well. During tomorrow’s meeting, I shall speak not just about Lady Rozemyne but also about the many challenges that have come our way.”

I turned the feystone back into an ordonnanz and agreed to meet the Zent at third bell the following day. Then I cleared away my study implements, ready to make preparations with Cordula.

“Welcome, Lady Hannelore,” Zent Eglantine greeted me warmly.

Once our retainers had prepared our tea, my host for the morning asked them to step outside. She giggled softly as they went, as if remembering something, then insisted that I drink from my cup and sample the provided sweets.

“There must be much you are reluctant to reveal about your time in the realm of the gods,” Zent Eglantine said. “May this privacy put you more at ease.”

“Forgive my presumption, but have you also communed with the gods?” I asked. It appeared so, yet no one had proclaimed her a divine avatar as they had Lady Rozemyne.

“I beheld the holy Erwaermen in the ivory garden, but no goddess descended upon me. My understanding comes from witnessing Lady Rozemyne’s torment at the hands of divine power with my own eyes. I know there are many complications in dealing with the gods, and much that cannot be spoken lightly.”

She paused for a moment, offering me a consoling smile. Then her eyes widened in surprise.

“But I do not sense the goddess’s power. Dunkelfelger reported that it was overflowing from you.”

“It was, but it left me quickly—far more quickly than in Lady Rozemyne’s case, from what the Alexandrians have told me.” I suddenly recalled what Dregarnuhr had said, and continued, “I believe my body does not accept divine power as easily as hers and is much less susceptible to being dyed.”

Zent Eglantine let out a quiet sigh of relief. “I had thought it might fall to me to advise you on how to dispel it, but I’m glad that won’t be necessary.” Lady Rozemyne had suffered far more in the clutches of divine power than I had imagined, and I was fortunate that its hold on me had faded so quickly.

“I suspect the intensity is related to the gravity of the task the gods perform—or perhaps how long one’s body is taken for. The goddess spent quite some time as Lady Rozemyne, did she not?”

“Indeed. And the goddess’s power took a great toll on her for it.”

It was then that I announced my intention to return the silver cloth Zent Eglantine had given me. Not only did I no longer need it, but it had come from another country and could prove most dangerous in the wrong hands. Cordula was carrying it for me, so the exchange would need to wait for her return.

“Take this, if you would,” the Zent said, holding out a sound-blocker. “Can you share with me what you have kept from the others? I am aware from reports that tragedy has befallen Lord Ferdinand, that twenty years of our country’s history are on the verge of collapse, and that Lady Rozemyne was summoned to repair them.”

I accepted the magic tool.

“Lady Hannelore,” my host continued, “do you know why the

Goddess of Time wishes to save Lord Ferdinand?"

"Come again...?"

For a moment, I was lost for words. The goddess had descended to save two decades of history, yet Zent Eglantine seemed more frustrated than relieved.

"May I ask what you mean?" I said.

"My apologies. Let me be clear that I am glad Yurgenschmidt has been given this opportunity to be saved. However, I wonder why they are intervening now when they turned a blind eye to all the atrocities of the civil war. No goddess descended when my family was murdered. I was offered no opportunity to save them."

As I was given a rare insight into Zent Eglantine's past, I became keenly aware of the difference in our ages and experiences. I had been so young at the time of the civil war and the purge that followed, and Dunkelfelger had suffered so little from them, that they barely even lingered in my memory. While others had fought and died, I had lived happily in the castle. I had not even known about war until I studied history, and even then, it had always been a matter of the past.

Yet Zent Eglantine had lived through one. I had never considered the agony she, the daughter of a former prince, must have endured in losing not only her loved ones but also her place in the royal family.

Could it be that many would actually welcome the undoing of the past twenty years?

Back in Dunkelfelger, everyone was simply abuzz over the knights regaining their memories. It hadn't occurred to me sooner, but many would surely wish to know why only Lord Ferdinand was being saved.

Everything depends on my response!

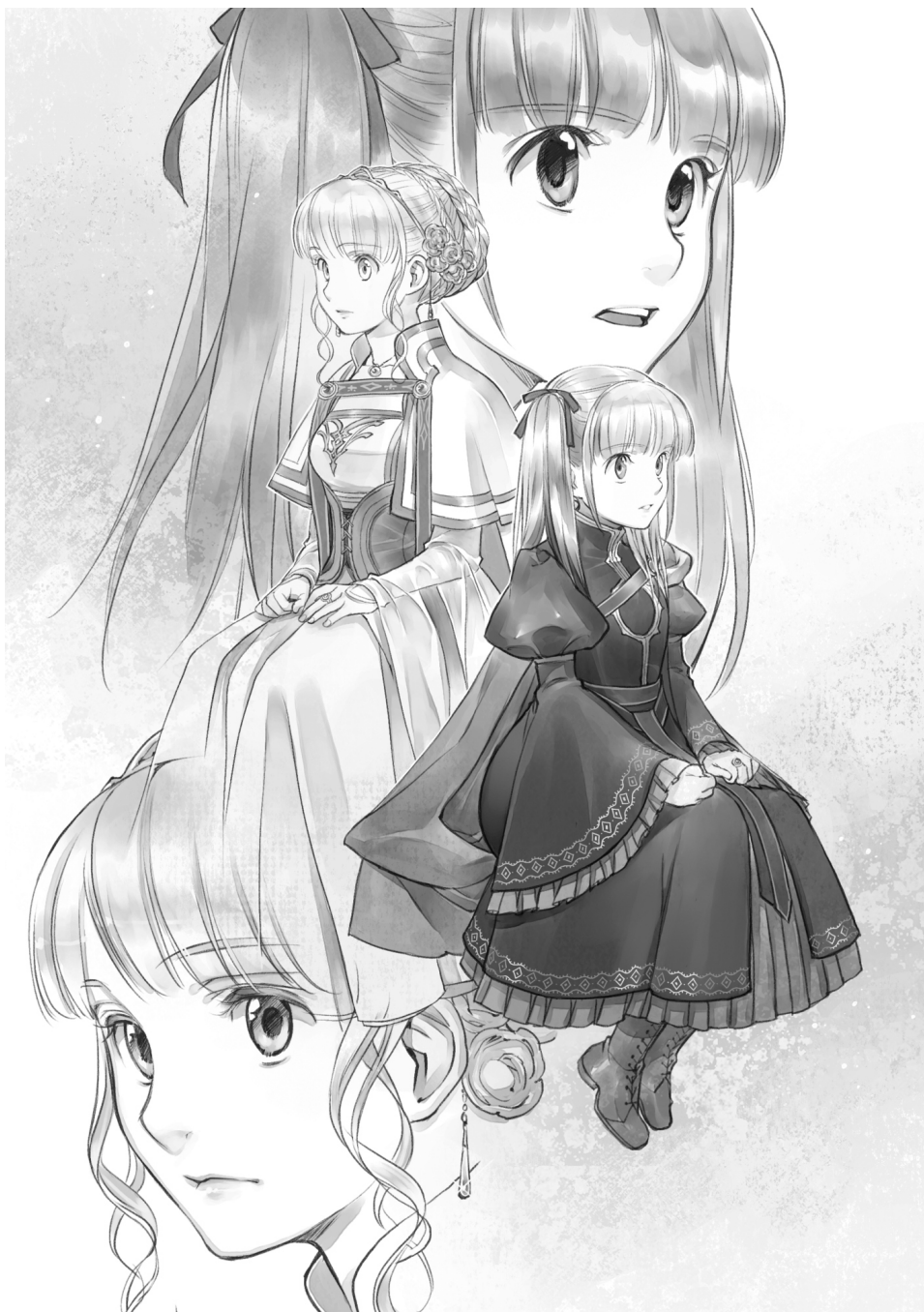
As the country's foremost authority, Zent Eglantine would need to explain the situation to those beneath her. Unless I conveyed the gods' intentions clearly, her dissatisfaction at Lord Ferdinand being chosen would seep into her commentary and poison the discourse.

I cannot back down, even at the risk of seeming rude.

I clenched my fists tightly on my lap. Before me was a decisive battle; I could feel it on my skin. As an archduke candidate of Dunkelfelger, the Zent's sword, I could not even hesitate in giving her the advice and information she needed to hear.

"Zent Eglantine," I said, my tone formal.

In an instant, her countenance shifted. I recognized the look on her face as that of a royal prepared to push down the majority of her biases and emotions.



“The Goddess of Time descended not because she cared for Lord Ferdinand, but because Wentuchte the Goddess of Weaving did not wish to see the beautiful tapestry she had woven be undone.”

Even through her stoicism, I could sense Zent Eglantine’s surprise. It was a fair reaction; hearing the goddesses speak about it had made my head spin.

“In the gods’ words, someone had severed the thread of Lord Ferdinand’s fate—a fact that, because of his role in recent history, threatened to unravel Wentuchte’s handiwork. Liebeskhilfe considered it a nonissue, however; she insisted the twenty years at stake could easily be woven again. I believe it would have been easier for them to recreate history than attempt to repair it.”

“Liebeskhilfe the Goddess of Binding...?” Zent Eglantine asked. “Was it not the Goddess of Time who descended, due to the cries of the Goddess of Weaving?”

Evidently, she was unaware how many gods I had encountered. I nodded and clarified that the Goddess of Binding had indeed been present as well.

“I doubt the Goddess of Time would have acted if not for the Goddess of Weaving’s pleas,” I said. “And in that case, twenty years of Yurgenschmidt’s history would have vanished without our knowing. It is purely by coincidence and the goddesses’ whims that we have been given this opportunity to save ourselves.”

“By mere coincidence...” Zent Eglantine muttered. As unpleasant as it sounded, two whole decades meant nothing to the gods.

“And that was far from the only coincidence,” I noted. “We have been this fortunate purely because Lady Rozemyne is the only Zent candidate with the Book of Mestionora, her thread is the same color as Lord Ferdinand’s, she would not hesitate to use her thread to repair his, and the goddesses succeeded in convincing Sterrat the God of Stars to unite them. Truly, there are nearly too many to mention!”

“You must slow down!” the Zent exclaimed, her nerves taking hold. “I do not even know where to begin!”

I answered each of her questions, recounting in detail what I had seen in the world of the gods. Only after hearing everything I had to say did she bring a hand to her forehead and heave a sigh.

“Lady Hannelore, have you told anyone else that Lady Rozemyne is the only Zent candidate with the Book of Mestionora?”

“No. The news surprised me, as I saw you receive it as well, but I thought it best to hold my tongue.”

Zent Eglantine explained that what she had received was merely a magic tool recreation known as the Grutrissheit. Lady Rozemyne’s intervention had delayed Yurgenschmidt’s collapse, affording the new Zent time to earn her own Book of Mestionora.

“Aub Dunkelfelger is aware of my circumstances, but regardless—I must ask that you keep them to yourself.”

I nodded. It said a lot about Zent Eglantine that she was striving to earn her own Book despite having the recreation.

“Now, on to my next question,” she said. “How many know that the gods performed a Starbind Ceremony?”

“I have not told anyone—not even those of Dunkelfelger or Alexandria.”

Zent Eglantine regarded me with astonishment. Though the idea of even the gods themselves recognizing Lady Rozemyne and Lord Ferdinand’s love had thrilled me at first, reality had cooled my enthusiasm.

“I thought it best not to,” I explained. “They were Starbound to save lives, and I did not know how a girl of Lady Rozemyne’s age being married might be perceived.”

“Indeed. I could not be more grateful for your caution and consideration.”

Many nobles would jump at the chance to gossip, valuing short-term amusements over the importance of restraint. If news spread that Lady Rozemyne had been Starbound, many would see it as scandalous and unsavory, no matter her role in saving the country’s history. Dunkelfelger had troubled Ehrenfest enough with rumors; spreading another was the last thing I wanted to do.

“I thought it best to wait for the relevant parties’ return, so that we might decide on how much to publicize,” I said.

In truth, I was somewhat scared of taking action without Lord Ferdinand’s permission. If I did, and my decision turned out not to align with his wishes, I could only imagine how deeply he would resent not just me but my entire duchy. I knew from experience how complex his schemes could be and that he had no mercy for anyone—not even the royal family—so I wished to avoid making an enemy of him at all costs.

“Indeed. However, Lady Hannelore... What will you do if Lady Rozemyne fails to save Lord Ferdinand?”

“Nothing,” I said without a moment’s hesitation. “Wentuchte’s history will unravel, and there will be nothing—absolutely nothing—we can do.”

Zent Eglantine paused in thought, then whispered, “Would that be such a bad thing? If we went back twenty years, we could prevent the civil war.” Even now, she clung to that desperate wish.

I understood all too well the appeal of nicer times, and the desire to go back and do things anew. After all, I myself had asked the gods for a chance to change history. Yet it seemed to me that Zent Eglantine was so focused on regaining her lost family that she was forgetting her present happiness. She would regain what was taken from her at the cost of what she currently held dear.

“If Lord Ferdinand had a hand in the impetus for the civil war, his removal from history might stop it from happening,” I said. “But do you truly believe he had something to do with the second prince’s death?”

The civil war had started with the death of the second prince, who had inherited the Grutrisheit. I sincerely doubted an underage archduke candidate from Ehrenfest would have been able to get near him, let alone bring about his demise.

“Not to mention,” I continued, “I suspect losing Lord Ferdinand would drastically increase the odds of a future where Lanzenave successfully steals the Grutrisheit and defeats the royal family.”

“Ah...”

“And—forgive me for speaking so plainly—could you truly bear to lose your child?”

Though it had yet to be made public, I was aware Zent Eglantine had given birth. Ensuring the baby’s safety had played a crucial role in her decision to rule Yurgenschmidt, Father had told me.

“My child? At the hands of Lanzenave, do you mean?”

I shook my head. “Lord Ferdinand is Lady Rozemyne’s mentor and guardian. She must have been raised under conditions that necessitated such a figure in her life for her to make it to the Royal Academy. If history changes and Lord Ferdinand vanishes, I find it hard to imagine Lady Rozemyne existing as she does now. And without her involvement...”

Zent Eglantine’s eyes widened in realization, and she cast her

gaze down. "I would have failed to resist the will of those around me and chosen Lord Sigiswald over Lord Anastasius."

Knowing her antipathy to war, Zent Eglantine had surely recognized Lord Sigiswald as the better option for peace. Her choosing Lord Anastasius had stunned noble society—and she wouldn't have felt comfortable doing it without Lady Rozemyne.

"Yurgenschmidt, in its current form, is the best it could possibly be," I said. "And it could not have reached this point without Lady Rozemyne's and Lord Ferdinand's cooperation. Even our everyday decisions have played a role in getting us here, so I would not want to repeat a single year, let alone twenty."

Zent Eglantine looked up, her expression now completely unburdened. "As deeply as it pains me to think of the family I lost, I do not want to lose the family I have now. And with the Grutrissheit in hand, I can guide Yurgenschmidt down a road of peace. I would not like history to repeat itself either."

For the first time that day, Zent Eglantine's smile reached her bright orange eyes. I smiled in turn, equal parts proud and relieved to have succeeded at such a pivotal moment.

I have done my duty as an archduke candidate of Dunkelfelger. No longer shall I tolerate Kenntrips calling me the unreliable Lady Crybaby!

"Before departing the world of the gods, I was informed that Lady Rozemyne succeeded in one of the repairs," I said. "We need only wait for her to finish." I was almost giddy with joy, pleased to have succeeded in everything I needed to.

"Then let us leave Lord Ferdinand and the gods to Lady Rozemyne and concern ourselves instead with Yurgenschmidt's peace."

Yurgenschmidt's peace?! Am I really the person to entrust that to?!

I had intended to broach the subject of bride-stealing ditto, but I was too taken aback to speak. Even if my voice hadn't failed me, I was in no position to disregard whatever the Zent intended to speak about next. She poured me another cup of tea, which I gratefully accepted.

"On that note, Lady Hannelore, I wish to discuss the upcoming bride-stealing ditto."

"You do?" I replied, nonplussed. "How can a match to decide the partner of a single archduke candidate threaten Yurgenschmidt's peace?"

"As we speak, there are duchies preparing to go to battle for

your hand in marriage, and they mean to bring their might to bear.”

Hmm? When she puts it like that, I suppose she has a point.

“If Dunkelfelger were forcing challenges on weaker duchies with the intention of stealing from them, I would agree with you,” I said. “But if other duchies wish to challenge us, I consider it a rather peaceful way to resolve the situation. It should leave very little room for resentment.”

“You consider ditter a peaceful means of resolution...?” Zent Eglantine asked, looking a bit concerned.

Clearly, there was a significant disparity in perception. Was this one of the differences between Dunkelfelger’s culture and that of other duchies that Cordula had warned me about? Were we at risk of another misconception, like the one that had complicated matters with Ehrenfest?

Whatever shall I do? It seems I am more corrupted by Dunkelfelger’s culture than I thought.

“My head attendant did warn me before we came here that Dunkelfelger views ditter differently from most nobles, and that I might need to clarify a few things to put us on the same page,” I noted. “May I?”

Zent Eglantine smiled at me as one might smile at a problematic child. “Yes, I believe that would be wise. To start, may I ask how you view this upcoming match?”

“How I view it...? Well, both here at the dormitory and at home, the people of my duchy have kicked up quite a fuss about it. If I am honest, I still don’t fully understand the situation and have mostly been going with the flow.”

I had barely recovered from my ten-day slumber when I was informed that Korinthsdaum, Drewanchel, and several other duchies were vying for my hand in marriage. And in what might as well have been the same breath, I had learned that the dormitory was in chaos due to Raufereg announcing his intention to participate in the upcoming ditter match.

Then there was Kenntrips’s declaration. “Be at ease, Lady Hannelore—though I would destroy any archduke candidate who attempted to wed you, I would not allow harm to come to you personally. And if you chose to give up on becoming the aub, I would accept full responsibility for the consequences.” It was just a standard seduction, of course. Wait, not a seduction! A, uh... Gaaah! Save me, Cordula!

I hurriedly shook my head, trying to dispel the memory of Kenntrips's gray eyes and his apparent attempt to court me. It wasn't something to get worked up over; Cordula's lecturing had calmed me down.

"Um, Lady Hannelore... Is something the matter?"

"No, nothing. Nothing at all. Surprisingly enough, not even Dunkelfelger has a precedent for several duchies challenging us to bride-stealing ditto at once. We have been preparing, but we have other concerns."

"Oh my. Is that so?" Zent Eglantine asked. I could only hope—no, pray—it had distracted her from my embarrassing behavior.

"Rarely do so many men propose to a woman whose suitors have already been chosen by her father. And not only that—far from merely asking to be considered, they have gone straight to insisting on bride-stealing ditto."

Motivation was high in the Dunkelfelger Dormitory, with everyone excited to defeat all our opponents with ease, but that didn't make the circumstances any less unusual. Personally, I felt a little out of my depth. Most of the major developments had occurred while I was asleep, so I could barely follow them, and I certainly didn't want people to assume I would become a second Lady Rozemyne simply because of my brush with a goddess. As it stood, I was mainly relying on my father and suitors to rescue me from this madness.

"Oh, also," I continued, "in the interest of getting us on the same page, I should note that it is not uncommon for players of bride-stealing ditto to perish. We hope our opponents will realize the risk and... Um, Zent Eglantine?"

Her previous smile was nowhere to be seen. My anxiety surged at the unexpected reaction.

"Um... This was my head attendant's concern more than my own. I am well aware that the other duchies know their lives are at stake. This is merely a formality to ensure we all see eye to eye."

She must be exasperated that I would go over something so obvious. I knew Cordula was worrying too much.

I smiled, hoping for some form of confirmation that Zent Eglantine felt the same way I did. Instead, she blinked a few times and cast her eyes down.

"To be perfectly clear, Lady Hannelore, are you saying those who challenge Dunkelfelger to bride-stealing ditto might lose their

lives in the process?"

"Yes, almost certainly. It is *ditter*, after all. The vast majority should survive, albeit with grievous wounds, but those too weak to drink rejuvenation potions tend not to make it. Deaths are only natural in a serious battle."

It was because such matches were so dangerous that, when the men of Dunkelfelger sought to challenge other duchies, the women desperately attempted to stop them.

"I did not anticipate that there would be deaths," Zent Eglantine said at last.

"Come again? Seriously?" I asked. My head attendant's concerns had been valid after all. But if she was right, what on earth did the other duchies think *ditter* was?

"There have been no deaths on the knight course, and I received no reports of anyone in the match between Dunkelfelger and Ehrenfest sustaining serious injuries, much less perishing."

"People do not die in class because the noble population has been so low since the purge that we have had to bring nobles back from the temple, and courses at the Royal Academy have shifted toward speed *ditter*. As for our match against Ehrenfest, there were no casualties only because Lady Rozemyne treated friend *and* foe with her powerful prayers. None of the participants died, but their lives were still very much on the line."

In my second year, Heissshitze had been gravely wounded during a *ditter* match, and in my third, several of the apprentice knights who had fallen from the sky after being hit by Sovereign knights had ended up comatose. Anyone who crossed blades or found themselves on the wrong end of an offensive magic tool was prone to being wounded one way or another.

"I was not aware *ditter* was so dangerous..." Zent Eglantine said under her breath.

Perhaps it was inevitable that the woman across from me, who received so much of her information from reports, did not know how many had been wounded during that *ditter* match, or that they had only survived with the aid of healing magic and rejuvenation potions. But even if such information had been withheld, I would at least have expected the Zent to know the risks that came with playing *ditter*.

"Given how many duchies have challenged us, I expect the battlefield to devolve into chaos," I added. "Those who have joined

as a gamble, hoping they can eke out a victory by taking advantage of one opening or another, will prove particularly dangerous. We intend to destroy them before anyone else, for they are least worthy of my hand.”

As I understood it, the Lord of Evil had similarly exploited weaknesses to secure his victories. Given how chaotic the battlefield would surely be, we were most cautious of those who would seek Verbergen’s aid.

“Um, Lady Hannelore... Might I propose deciding the victor through speed ditter instead?” Zent Eglantine asked.

“Hmm? But speed ditter and bride-stealing ditter are entirely different.”

“Ah... Is ditter not just, well, *ditter*?”

Zent Eglantine tilted her head at me, and I tilted mine in return. It was as if we weren’t even speaking the same language. Did the people of other duchies not even understand that ditter came in various forms? I was starting to grow uneasy.

What should I do, Cordula?! The gap between us is far greater than I expected!

“I see now that, indeed, we are at cross-purposes,” I said. “But in our endeavor to remedy that, where should we even begin?”

We exchanged a contemplative look. Without my head attendant to consult, I would need to come up with a solution of my own.

“Zent Eglantine, would you confirm something for me? If an aub made a decision concerning his duchy, would it be improper for those of other duchies to protest it?”

“Yes, most certainly. As the Zent, I must consult the country’s aubs before making decisions about Yurgenschmidt—but the aubs decide matters of their own duchies.”

It was far from unusual for higher-ranking duchies to exert pressure on those beneath them, so lower-ranking duchies tended to follow their lead. A higher-ranked duchy publicly disagreeing with a lower-ranked duchy’s decision on internal matters, however, was entirely unacceptable.

I met Zent Eglantine’s gaze, and we both sighed in relief. At last, we had found some common ground.

“Do the other duchies’ demands for bride-stealing ditter not count as protesting my father’s choice for my suitors?” I asked. “Do they not see that the moment they issued their challenges, they

were disrespecting Aub Dunkelfelger himself?"

Zent Eglantine placed a hand on her forehead. "Most certainly not. Only now do I understand."

As it stood, Dunkelfelger ranked higher than any other duchy in Yurgenschmidt. I had assumed those who had challenged us had done so knowing the risk involved, but evidently not.

"Based on our conversation thus far, might I conclude that the other duchies considered bride-stealing ditter an interduchy sport of some kind?" I asked. "To those of us from Dunkelfelger, it is a serious match upon which the aub's pride and my hand in marriage depend."

Our match against Ehrenfest during my third year had been just as serious, with both Lady Rozemyne and me staking our bridal futures on the outcome. As far as I knew, Ehrenfest had treated it not as a game but with the severity a contest of that nature deserved.

"It never occurred to me that these demands for bride-stealing ditter might offend Aub Dunkelfelger," Zent Eglantine said. "In the past, duchies were required to play ditter to participate in a religious ceremony, and Dunkelfelger seems to be gleefully accepting this recent profusion of challenges."

"Duchies were required to play ditter for the sake of our joint research. And as those of Dunkelfelger wish for me to marry within the duchy, they have no choice but to accept the challenges. If they appear gleeful, it is only because this is an ideal opportunity to destroy those insolent enough to oppose us."

Silence fell. Once again, Zent Eglantine failed to understand me.

How strange... Defeating an opponent in ditter ends the conflict there, with no lingering bitterness. Compared to Klassenberg's obstinate demands for yearslong reparations, I consider it a fairly peaceful resolution.

"You seem surprised," I said. "There must be even greater confusion between my duchy and the others than I thought."

"Indeed, this is more than just a simple misunderstanding. Evidently, we do not understand bride-stealing ditter in the slightest." Zent Eglantine frowned, then regarded me with a severe look. "Lady Hannelore, if a means of minimizing casualties is not devised soon, some duchies might never recover from the battle to come. I must ask that Dunkelfelger, as a greater duchy, show some consideration for their weaker opponents."

“You wish for us to restrain ourselves when the stakes are so high? Forgive me, but that is far from a reasonable demand. We of Dunkelfelger always bring our full might to bear. We pay no mind to any amount of carnage. If those duchies suffer because of us, they have only themselves to blame. One must consider the consequences before making such a mighty foe.”

Accountability was crucial. Even when our black feystone shield, one of our most precious treasures, had been turned to gold dust, the blame had fallen not on Lady Rozemyne but on my brother, who had chosen to use it, and my father, who had given him permission to do so. Any duchy that rallied its most powerful knights against us had to consider the risk of them being wounded or killed.

“I suspect the other duchies issued their challenges without truly knowing what they were signing themselves up for, imagining something more akin to the Royal Academy’s ditter matches than a serious battle,” Zent Eglantine mused. “Bride-stealing ditter is unique to Dunkelfelger; is that not reason enough to forgive their confusion?”

I could tell she was searching for any kind of compromise, but her position was fundamentally unreasonable. Why should we concede when we were the ones being challenged?

“Yes, bride-stealing ditter is unique to Dunkelfelger,” I said. “It is rarely seen even within our duchy. But if our opponents were not entirely certain what they were getting themselves into, why did they issue their challenges in the first place?”

I suspected those of Drewanchel were at least familiar with the custom, owing to their stature and the fact they had issued a formal challenge. Not to mention, I doubted someone as capable as Lord Ortwin would make such a move without first doing adequate research. They had taken the necessary precautions, and any duchies that hadn’t could only blame themselves for their recklessness.

“How troublesome...” Zent Eglantine muttered. “Could we not cancel the match entirely?”

“A most splendid idea. How would you propose we do that?”

I gazed upon our Zent with eyes brimming with hope. If there existed a means to peacefully stop the ditter match, the women of Dunkelfelger would collectively shed tears of gratitude.

“What if I issue a royal decree that you must decide on a

husband *before* the match? Perhaps those of Dunkelfelger would find that agreeable, since you would be making the choice yourself.”

Don't say that! You sound just like the Goddess of Binding!

My mind flooded with thoughts of the chaos my careless prayers had unleashed.

“But you would need to make your decree during the Archduke Conference, and the bride-stealing ditter is scheduled to be held before then,” I said. “Not to mention, if you used your authority to outright cancel the match, it would harm Dunkelfelger’s loyalty toward the Zent.”

“Yes, I feared as much...” Zent Eglantine sighed, then looked up with a start. “What if I withhold my permission for it to be held at the Royal Academy?”

“What relevance would that have?” I asked, tilting my head at her. “Since they are vying for my hand, the match will inevitably be held in Dunkelfelger.” There was no end to the confusion.

Zent Eglantine returned a quizzical look of her own. “The match between Dunkelfelger and Ehrenfest was held at the Royal Academy, no? And with permission from Rauffen and Anastasius.”

I averted my eyes, reminded of my failure to stop my brother all that time ago. “In that case, my brother wished to prevent interference from my parents or Aub Ehrenfest. He disguised his bride-stealing ditter as bride-*taking* ditter, thereby forcing it to be held at the Royal Academy. True bride-stealing ditter takes place in the woman’s duchy—the challenger fights to quite literally steal her and must face both her parents in martial combat.”

Had my brother truly wished to secure Lady Rozemyne, he should have taken the battle to Ehrenfest. I would not accept anything less from those who sought to steal my hand in marriage.

If the other duchies understand this little about ditter, it's no wonder we ran into all that confusion with Ehrenfest.

Considering the past led me to feel extremely sympathetic for Zent Eglantine, who was being forced to mediate our bride-stealing ditter match despite not having a stake in it or even knowing anything about it.

“Do you have no ideas yourself, Lady Hannelore?”

“Now that the challenges have been issued, there is no future in which the enthused men of Dunkelfelger would give up on them. We would need to have acted preemptively.” Suddenly, I

understood why Mother had been so frustrated with me for not watching my brother more carefully. “Should you wish to take action as the Zent, I would advise targeting the duchies that have challenged us. It was their fault we ended up in this situation, not ours.”

“Yes, that is true...” Zent Eglantine heaved a heavy sigh. “Though it is not my place—nor my wish—to intervene, I must prevent mass casualties from arising in the many duchies that have challenged you.”

I placed a hand on my cheek in thought. If the Zent took action against our challengers, it would give Dunkelfelger room to compromise.

“Ordering that the match be canceled would earn you ire, but what if you order that it be held under your supervision, or universally restrict the use of offensive magic tools to minimize risks?” I asked. “If you present your conditions wisely and ensure that all parties follow them, I see no reason they would not be accepted. The women of Dunkelfelger would certainly welcome such changes.”

Zent Eglantine’s eyes softened. “Would they, now? That is most heartening to hear. I shall oversee the match, then, and make my terms clear: It shall be held in the Royal Academy, and only nonlethal magic tools may be used. I shall also be present for the signing of the ditler contracts. May I ask you to deliver a letter to Aub Dunkelfelger consulting him on the matter?”

“But of course.”

If the Zent got involved, the other duchies would no longer be able to unjustly complain that they had misunderstood what they were getting into. She would also be able to block any tyranny from Lord Sigiswald, who would doubtless attempt to abuse his status as former royalty. As long as I made those advantages clear, Father would surely agree to her request.

“Is this not troublesome for you, Lady Hannelore? It must hurt to have your partner decided not by your father, who considered all the best options for his daughter, but by the outcome of a ditler match...”

“That is precisely why Dunkelfelger women have the right to demand engagement tasks from men—though this seems a peculiar aspect of our culture that other duchies remain largely unaware of.”

I thought back to how I had demanded tasks from Lord

Wilfried. Considering how little even Zent Eglantine understood of our duchy's customs, I could see why he had been so dazed.

At the time, I had been desperate to escape my situation by any means necessary. But now, looking back with a level head... I must admit it was embarrassing.

"I suspect at least the term 'bride-stealing ditter' was familiar to the greater duchies with ancient histories, as well as the duchies that once belonged to Dunkelfelger, but I doubt they understood much beyond that," Zent Eglantine reflected. "I was familiar with the term myself, yet I did not realize my understanding was so flawed."

During my time in the past, the woman before me now had admonished me and given me the advice I so dearly needed to hear. If even she, in all her wisdom, remained this ignorant of our culture, the other duchies stood no chance.

"Should you truly wish to intervene, Zent Eglantine, perhaps you could explain to the duchies involved what they have misunderstood and give them the means to back out if they lack the resolve to continue," I said. As eager as the knights of Dunkelfelger were to claim victory against their opponents, we could not force other duchies to contend if they changed their minds. "All that remains is to convince my father, lest our duchy resent your involvement."

"Do you think he would permit the other duchies to rescind their challenges?"

I smiled, hoping to ease Zent Eglantine's worries. "They might be expected to offer tribute to amend for their rudeness, but yes, I am sure he would."

Thus concluded our meeting. Cordula returned the silver cloth we had borrowed, and I quickly relayed the letter Zent Eglantine had written to Dunkelfelger.

"Welcome back, Lady Hannelore."

"How was your meeting with the Zent?"

Our conversation had lasted long enough that it was lunch by the time we returned to the dormitory. I entered the dining hall to a warm welcome from my retainers and suitors, who had just come back from their morning classes.

"For the most part, we discussed the world of the gods and the upcoming bride-stealing ditter," I explained. "In the case of the latter, we learned that much of the country is painfully ignorant on

the matter, so the Zent intends to mediate. She entrusted me with a letter for my father.”

“The Zent intends to do what?!” Rasantark exclaimed, face twisted in a grimace. “Surely that counts as meddling with duchy affairs!”

The other knights seemed similarly dissatisfied, but Kenntrips merely frowned in thought. “Was that your own proposal, Lady Hannelore?” he asked.

“Yes, I guided the conversation in such a way that she felt it was her only choice. We have yet to receive a response to her letter, as I sent it but a moment ago, but I trust Father will accept her terms.”

“May I ask *why* you sought her involvement?” Rasantark pressed, crossing his arms. As a knight to his core, he must have found it unforgivable that an outsider would interfere with the sanctity of a ditter match.

“Her involvement will make it clear to the other duchies what bride-stealing ditter truly means. Some will rescind their challenges, which will make things much easier for us.”

Dunkelfelger would already be facing a one-sided onslaught from every duchy that desired my hand in marriage. The fewer duchies looking to seek Verbergen’s aid, the better.

“No matter what, we are likely to face a unified front. I am merely reducing its size,” I said. “Ditter begins not with the fighting, but with one’s preparations.”

If we cautioned the other duchies ourselves that their very lives were at stake, they would consider it some kind of trap or intimidation tactic. But if the warning came from the Zent, they would surely heed it well. I expected the lesser duchies who had considered their involvement a harmless gamble to be the first to change their tune.

“Make no mistake—I do not intend to lose this match. I am merely reducing the chance of an unworthy duchy securing my hand in marriage,” I explained with a smile. “The Zent’s involvement will also dampen the tyranny of any former royals. If used well, she could prove a stronger ally than any other.”

The knights raised their fists and erupted in a triumphant battle cry.

“Now, now. People are trying to eat,” I said. “If you wish to make noise, you may do so in the common room.”

Before another word could be spoken, Rasantark took hold of my left hand. He gazed upon me, chestnut eyes wet with tears and gleaming with emotion, and declared, "Lady Hannelore! I am well and truly moved! To think you made an ally of *the Zent herself*!"

"I recognize your excitement, but this will give us only a minor advantage. I trust you and my father will still fight your hardest to protect me. Do not let your guard down."

"You may count on us!"

I tapped Rasantark's hand, prompting him to let go. He must have grabbed me unconsciously, for he let out a surprised yelp and strode out of the dining hall.

"You maneuvered the meeting surprisingly well," Kenntrips remarked.

"I, too, am growing. No longer will you have reason to call me an unreliable Lady Crybaby."

Kenntrips chuckled, then took my left hand. I tapped it as I had done with Rasantark, but he looked at me head-on and said, "Do not push yourself too hard."

"I shan't..."

Kenntrips then departed, leaving me to begin my meal. Enough people had finished eating that the dining hall felt rather barren. I took the opportunity to consider Zent Eglantine's final warning.

"Remember, Hannelore—as the second divine avatar, your every word and action could have serious ramifications for Yurgenschmidt. Take great care not to express support for any one party before Lady Rozemyne's return."

I gazed down at my left hand, then shook my head.

I don't have anyone to support in the first place.

Irregular Regularity

With my divine power gone and my meeting with Zent Eglantine concluded, I could finally return to my classes. Life was regaining some semblance of normalcy for the first time since my two-week absence. I had spent so long in my room studying for my written lessons that I actively looked forward to them, but my suitors and retainers in the entrance hall were the picture of worry.

“Are you going to be okay, Lady Hannelore?”

“As concerned as you might be, I must catch up with my peers eventually,” I said, speaking for my own sake as much as theirs. “I shall do what I can to advance through my practical lessons as quickly as possible.”

“We’re more worried about your interactions with other students than your grades,” Rasantark noted with a troubled smile.

“Hmm?”

“Not only were you proclaimed the second divine avatar, but you also received a veritable slew of proposals,” Kenntrips added, looking equally unsure. “We expect many duchies will approach you, hoping to secure an advantage in the upcoming ditto match.”

“I understand, but you have nothing to fret about,” I assured my suitors. No matter how much the other duchies tried to threaten or coerce me, I would never surrender victory again. I didn’t want to lose the faith of my retainers or anyone else.

“On the contrary, this first day will prove most dangerous of all,” Rasantark said, turning stern eyes to the door. “I have received reports that the moment you leave this dormitory to attend classes, you will be swarmed by would-be suitors.”

My guard knights looked equally tense, but something about Rasantark’s phrasing seemed strange to me. “Are my suitors not entirely separate from those challenging us to bride-stealing ditto?” I asked. “No matter what happens, I do not foresee myself socializing with them.”

“As far as Korinthsdaum is concerned, Lord Sigiswald became one of your suitors the moment he issued his challenge.”

“In what world does that make sense?!”

One became a suitor—an engagement candidate—only when the person they meant to court, or that person’s parents, acknowledged them as a potential partner. The term was not intended for cases where love went unreciprocated or the parents didn’t approve. It could also apply to those who had received permission from the other party’s parents before proposing formally. Kenntrips and Rasantark were both my suitors, for example, as Father had chosen them for me. And since there were no men who loved me and whom I loved in turn, nobody else had claim to the title.

“Yes, they might consider their challenges to bride-stealing ditto equivalent to proposals,” I continued. “But as their interest in me is unrequited, I would consider it more accurate to call them declarations of war. No one who has challenged us can be said to have my father’s approval.”

“Korinthsdaum does indeed seem to believe their challenge was a proposal—but they also think that by accepting it, we accept Lord Sigiswald as a suitor.”

If anything, it makes him an enemy we must do everything in our power to destroy.

I tilted my head, unable to grasp Korinthsdaum’s logic. Like so many others, they seemed not to recognize the significance of bride-stealing ditto. Lord Sigiswald was presumably as ignorant as Zent Eglantine had been on the subject.

“Did no one correct them?” I asked. “If a misconception is to blame, why have we not educated them?” Lord Sigiswald still wielded plenty of authority as a former member of the royal family, and I feared his warped beliefs were influencing the other duchies.

“We tried to correct them, but they refused to listen,” Rasantark said. “It really is troublesome. They’re ignorant fools, blind to the fact that both you and Aub Dunkelfelger are utterly rejecting their advances.”

If there were mutual affection between Lord Sigiswald and me, Korinthsdaum would have challenged us to bride-taking ditto. And if they had my father’s permission, they would not have needed to challenge us at all. Rasantark was correct to call them ignorant fools.

“Although I do not disagree with you, you speak too frankly about a man who once served as royalty,” I said. “Take care not to

say such things in public.”

“You must take care as well, Lady Hannelore. Nothing you say will get through to him.”

I could tell from Rasantark’s grin that he wasn’t even acknowledging my request. My retainers did nothing to discourage him either; in fact, they seemed to be doing the opposite.

“Korinthsdaum is not the only pest to be wary of. Be careful around anyone who has bought into their claims; lesser duchies near the bottom of the rankings are easily manipulated.”

“Um, what exactly is going on out there...?” I asked, looking around. “The very thought of leaving the dormitory is making me a tad anxious.”

Rasantark triumphantly thumped his chest. “Fear not, Lady Hannelore—I shall ensure that not a single person approaches you on your way to class. Please rest easy.”

“I... do not think I can. Details. I require more details.”

“We have told you what we can,” Kenntrips interjected. “If you wish to understand the rest, you will need to see it for yourself. Now, let us be off.”

At once, he took my left hand, and Rasantark took my right. Each wielded his schtappe in his free hand.

“Kenntrips, is this truly necessary?” I asked. “You are only taking me to class.”

“Rasantark was a tad extreme with his phrasing, but we must be on guard. I refuse to let any threats near you,” Kenntrips said with resignation. He then leaned closer to me and, in a low voice, added, “This might have slipped your mind, given how much has happened of late, but this is your first time going outside since the goddess descended. You are going to see Lord Wilfried and Lord Ortwin in class. Are you ready for that?”

The blood drained from my face. Amid all the chaos, I had completely forgotten that Lord Wilfried had only recently refused to give me engagement tasks. He had rejected me twice, even, if one considered my return to the past a recent event. Experience had taught me I never had a chance with him at all.

Even if I found I was emotionally ready to see them, Lord Wilfried would doubtless still feel awkward about having turned me down. As far as he was concerned, I must have proposed to him entirely out of the blue. And on top of that, now Lord Ortwin was vying for my hand in marriage.

How am I supposed to face them? Do I act nonchalant and speak as if nothing happened? Gah... I could never!

“Just a m-moment,” I said. “I... need to prepare. It would seem returning to class is a more worrying task than I thought.”

“Were the days you spent holed up in your room not preparation enough?” Cordula asked coldly. “We must be off. You will be late otherwise.”

At her merciless instruction, my retainers opened the door. I struggled to escape, but with Rasantark and Kenntrips on either side of me, there was nowhere I could go. My heart pounded as I was dragged out of the dormitory.

“Ah, is that Lady Hannelore?!”

“Yes! There she is!”

“It was Dregarnuhr the Goddess of Time who descended into her, right?”

“The top-ranking duchies and even former royalty are vying for her hand. They even intend to play ditler over her.”

No sooner had we left the dormitory than those of other duchies turned our way and gossiped. Intrigued-looking students paused on their way to class, electing instead to approach my retainers as they strained for a better look at me. It was so different from what I was used to that I couldn’t help but gasp. As someone raised as an archduke candidate of Dunkelfelger, never in my life had I been the focus of so many uncouth gazes.

This is simply too much!

I could see now why Lord Ferdinand had gone to the trouble of reshaping the narrative of the war with Lanzenave, and why he had spread rumors to protect Lady Rozemyne after she stole Ahrensbach’s foundation. Kenntrips, Rasantark, and my retainers probably felt the same way.

The stares and whispers around me felt like tiny needles against my skin. I straightened my back and tightened my grip on my escorts’ arms, trying to hide how I truly felt—though it was such a habit of mine that they saw through it right away.

“This situation is unlikely to change until the ditler match,” Rasantark said. “Rest assured, though—I made a promise to protect you, and I intend to keep it.”

As I had been locked away not just in the dormitory but in my own room, I had not realized just how abnormal things had become. When my divine power had faded and life in the dormitory

had returned to normal, I had naively assumed the other students would think nothing of me. It was the complete opposite—and I would only attract more attention as the ditler match approached.

“Kenntrips, I want to go back to the dormitory,” I said.

“I understand, but an archduke candidate of Dunkelfelger must not shut herself away. We shall surround you until we reach your classroom. Strive to finish your classes as soon as possible.”

Loath though I was to admit it, he was right—skipping my classes and failing my fifth year would put a black mark on Dunkelfelger’s reputation as well as my own. The fact a goddess had descended into me would not make for an adequate excuse; Lady Rozemyne was such an excellent student that I doubted it would even slow her down. I could not bear to imagine how people would think of me if she passed the rest of her exams before me, despite my having returned from the world of the gods first.

I must advance as far as I can in my classes before she comes back!

Sensing my resolve, Rasantark let out a sigh. “In truth, I wish you didn’t have to go. Only archduke candidates can enter the classroom, but Lords Ortwin and Dahvidh both seek your hand. Furthermore, it is my understanding that Lord Ortwin proposed *before* this turned into such a large fuss. I fear you might find yourself talked into a corner and agree to his proposal without realizing.”

There was unmistakable sorrow in the apprentice knight’s voice. Just how easily did he think I could be swayed? I aired my frustration without a second thought.

“Please keep in mind that I have refused him once already on the grounds that my suitors have been chosen for me.”

“Yet he proposed anyway, even escalating his request into a ditler challenge. How could I not worry?”

Fair point...

It was easy to insist I would not be coerced before the ditler match, but it meant little when Rasantark didn’t trust me. I had betrayed Dunkelfelger once before, after all.

“Lady Hannelore?” Rasantark asked, sensing my hesitation.

“You are right,” I said with a sigh. “I am merely reaping what I have sown.”

“There is no need to feel so down,” Kenntrips said, offering me a sympathetic smile. “Simply leave the classroom as soon as your lesson is over, even if others wish to speak with you. Rasantark and

I will be waiting outside.”

“Thank you.”

Having been raised as an archduke candidate of Dunkelfelger, sworn to protect my duchy and its people, I had always secretly wished to be like the heroines in the romance stories I enjoyed—the ones who were always protected. Now I realized that wish had long since come true. My retainers and suitors had always been there, shielding me out of deep concern.

Ngh... They might only be here to escort me, but I can feel my cheeks burning nonetheless.

I gazed down at my hands. My left clung to Kenntrips’s arm, and my right, to Rasantark’s. I had been trained to always keep one hand free lest I ever come under attack and need to fight back.

I... suppose there is no harm in entrusting my safety to them.

A shy, almost ticklish feeling welled up in me. Before I knew it, the stares and voices around me had faded into the background.

“I shall finish quickly and return as soon as possible,” I announced as we reached our destination.

“Understood. Until then, Lady Hannelore.”

Waving to my anxious entourage, I stepped into the classroom for the first time in what felt like forever. In an instant, smiling students surrounded me on all sides.

“Good morning, Lady Hannelore,” one said. “My apprentice scholars informed me that the Goddess of Time descended into you. Might I request the details?”

“It has been too long,” another noted. “How did you spend your long rest?”

“The gods invited you alongside Lady Rozemyne, did they not?” asked a third. “Where is she? Did she not return with you?”

They all spoke at once, and they eyed me so intensely that I was rendered speechless. In the classroom, there were no suitors or retainers to shield me.

“Um, everyone,” I said. “If you would allow me—”

I had intended to explain that the goddess had taken my body only to summon Lady Rozemyne, but Lord Dahvidh of Lindenthal stepped forward before I could. He held out a hand to me.

“Good morning, Lady Hannelore. I am delighted that you accepted my proposal. It will be my pleasure to act as your suitor.”

At once, I remembered what Rasantark had told me. Lords Dahvidh and Ortwin were claiming to be my suitors. I assumed

Lindenthal was one of the lesser duchies that had issued their challenge after Drewanchel and Korinthsdaum.

“You misunderstand, Lord Dahvidh. Accepting a ditter challenge is not the same as accepting a proposal,” I said, leaving his hand in the air. “Lindenthal challenged Dunkelfelger to war. You are not my suitor but a foe for me to crush.”

Lord Dahvidh merely stared at me, arm still outstretched. Evidently, I would need to be even clearer.

“Speaking with the Zent revealed to me that most duchies know very little of the true nature of bride-stealing ditter.”

I explained that issuing such a challenge was equivalent to opposing Aub Dunkelfelger’s decision for my suitors—that it was an act of disrespect, not a traditional proposal. I then noted that bride-stealing ditter was not the same as the Royal Academy’s speed ditter but was rather a gruesome battle to the death between the families of all parties involved.

“Were you aware of that when you issued your challenge?” I asked. “If not, I would advise you speak with Aub Lindenthal about rescinding it.”

Lord Dahvidh retreated a step, the blood having drained from his face. Elfriede of Lehmbruck looked just as pale; one of her brothers must have been among my challengers. My suspicion that the other duchies were largely ignorant of our culture had only been confirmed.

Already, many have backed away from me. I have defeated several of our enemies before even setting foot on the battlefield.

I was performing rather well as a Dunkelfelger archduke candidate, I thought. With any luck, I would be able to reduce the number of participating duchies even further. But my celebrations were cut short when Lord Ortwin entered the classroom.

“Lady Hannelore. I am glad to see you are well. I was deeply worried about you, since I was there for the goddess’s descent. How are you faring?”

Convincing Drewanchel to retract their challenge would be difficult—they had a full understanding of bride-stealing ditter and had likely even spread misinformation to give themselves an advantage. There was a reason Rasantark had been so wary of Lord Ortwin backing me into a corner.

I will not be defeated so easily!

My fists tightly clenched, I turned to Lord Ortwin with a smile.

“Good morning. I sincerely appreciate your concern, but as you can see, I have made a full recovery. I intend to devote myself to my coursework so that I might make up for lost time.”

I racked my brain for how I might get a leg up on Drewanchel. The air between us grew tense as I debated whether to end the conversation or transition into gathering intelligence.

“Enough chatter,” Professor Anastasius said as he entered the room, slicing through the tension in an instant. “Class is about to begin.”

I headed to my desk, more relieved than I cared to admit. For all my resolve, I doubted I could beat an archduke candidate of Drewanchel in a game of information gathering. I also needed to focus on passing—for all my studying in my room, I could only advance in practicals in the classroom, and I was already two weeks behind. I wanted to close the gap between me and my fellow students as quickly as I could.

Practicals for the archduke candidate course required an exorbitant amount of mana, so we were given time to drink rejuvenation potions and recover. To avoid Lord Ortwin, I would wait for him to finish resting before drinking my own potion. He was my only remaining threat in the classroom now that I had dealt with Lord Dahvidh of Lindenthal.

I must devise a plan with my retainers to counter Drewanchel.

Keeping half an eye on Lord Ortwin, I drank my rejuvenation potion and took a short break to recover. Lord Wilfried took the opportunity to approach me.

According to Kenntrips, Ehrenfest didn't even attempt to propose to me.

I saw no reason to be on guard against him. But no sooner had I started to relax than I remembered what else Kenntrips had told me. Indeed, it had not been long ago that Lord Wilfried had refused my request for engagement tasks.

Wait! This is going to be far too uncomfortable!

As I silently floundered, Lord Wilfried sat next to me. He let his eyes wander as he searched for his next words.

“Lady Hannelore,” he eventually began, “there is something I wish to say. May I?”

“C-Certainly. Be my guest.”

He handed me a sound-blocker, which I promptly accepted. If he asked about the events of the gazebo, I would answer. It seemed

only fair, when I had so ignorantly thrust a proposal upon him. I steeled my resolve and squeezed the magic tool as Lord Wilfried regarded me with kind green eyes.

“I think you would be happy with Ortwin.”

“Excuse me...?”

My mind went blank, and I squeezed the sound-blocker so tightly that my hand started to tremble. Whatever courage I had mustered was blown away in an instant.

“The title of divine avatar is an exceptionally heavy one,” he continued. “I speak from having been engaged to Rozemyne. Your partner will need not just resolve but power to protect you. Ortwin, I think, has both.”

“I wonder...”

I understood both the burden of my title and the fact that anyone who wished to marry me would need the authority to keep me safe. What remained a mystery, however, was why Lord Wilfried was using this opportunity to prop up Lord Ortwin. He was indirectly insisting that Kenntrips and Rasantark were not suitable candidates to marry me.

“I already have suitors who are ready to protect me,” I said.

“Yes, I understand. In a duel, neither Ortwin nor I could hope to beat them. Yet I cannot help but question if that will be enough. As an archduke candidate of Dunkelfelger and a divine avatar, the threats to you will be more political than physical, and there are many boundaries that archnobles cannot surpass. They are not present in this very room, for example.”

I recalled the bitterness on Rasantark’s face as we had parted at the door.

“Ortwin is an archduke candidate of a greater duchy, talented enough that, if not for Rozemyne, he would regularly be chosen as first-in-class,” Lord Wilfried continued. “His relationship with Lady Adolphine allows him to come out strongly against Lord Sigiswald, and he admired you even before the recent fuss.”

Lord Wilfried, have you simply forgotten that I demanded engagement tasks from you?

I understood he was speaking for my sake, and I was relieved he did not seem awkward. Even so, it was deeply unpleasant to see him act as though I had not proposed at all. Yes, it must have been abrupt and uncomfortable for him, but I had not approached him lightly. My decision had been the result of much agonizing and

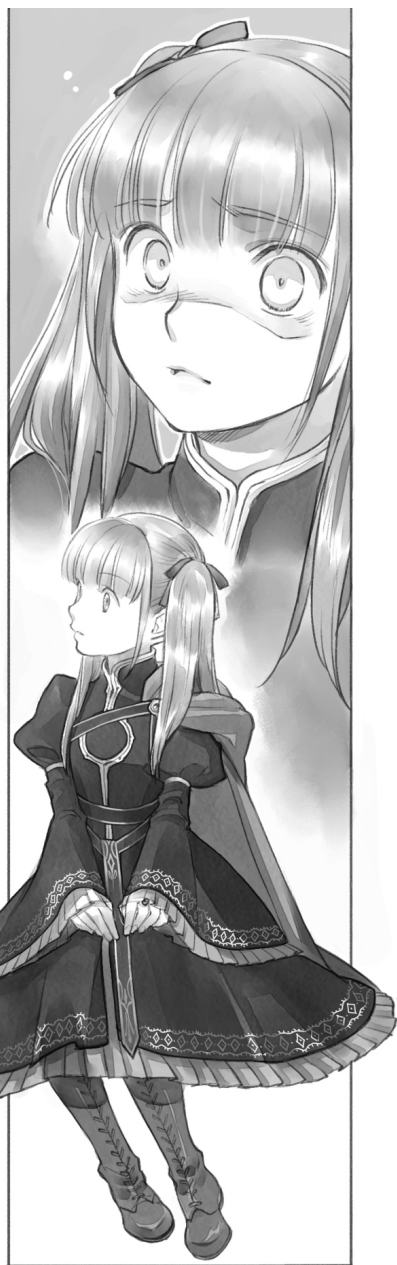
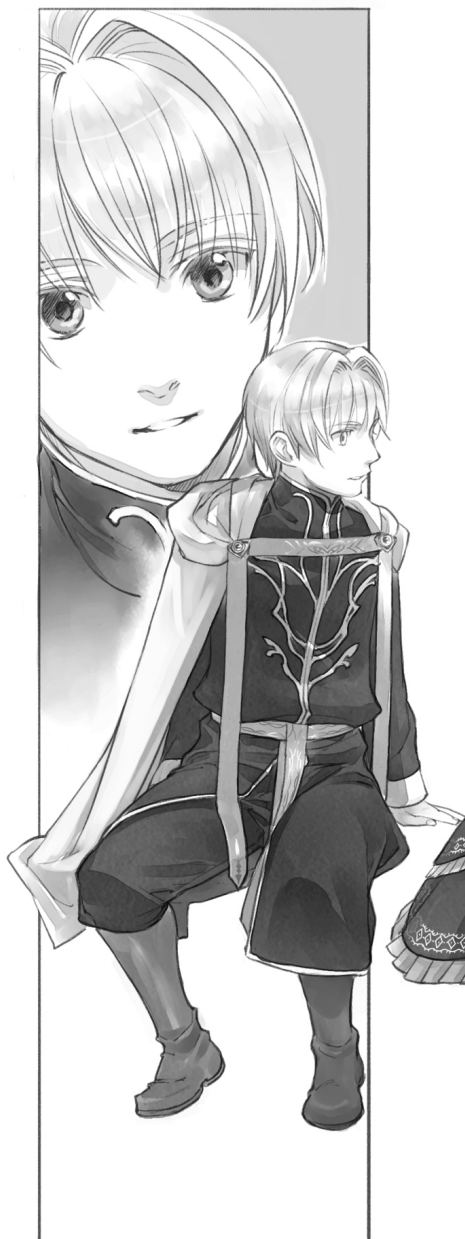
consideration, and it had ultimately come from the heart. Had it been so inconsequential to him that he thought it appropriate to push me into the arms of another man, or did he think my feelings for him had vanished the moment he turned me down?

I am not—nor have I ever been—more than just a friend to him.

As he brightly elaborated on how great a husband Lord Ortwin would surely be for me, I found myself uncertain how to reply. Nothing could have prepared me for such heartache.

“I want you to be happy, Lady Hannelore. To that end, I intend to support Ortwin in the upcoming bride-stealing dinner match.”

Come again?! He intends to do what?!



I looked up with a start, sentimentality thrown to the wind. Were Ehrenfest and Drewanchel forming an alliance?

As a greater duchy and the duchy of knowledge, Drewanchel was not an opponent we could afford to take lightly. And if Ehrenfest, to whom we had lost time and time again, intended to support them, we would need to plan our next actions wisely. Lady Rozemyne and Lord Ferdinand had moved to Alexandria, so we would not need to worry about them, but Ehrenfest's knights had most certainly adopted their strategies.

I should question Lady Charlotte about this.

It seemed that even I was taking bride-stealing ditter too lightly. Never had I thought to be wary of a duchy that had not even issued a challenge. If the match were being held in Dunkelfelger, this would not have been a concern, as unrelated duchies would never have been able to involve themselves. In the Royal Academy, however, they could indeed provide their aid. My failure to predict this, even after the intrusion by the Sovereign Knight's Order, made me feel pitiful. I would need to gather intelligence more broadly to determine which duchies were likely to work together, and which ones might ally against us.

"I thank you ever so much for your valuable insight," I said. "I feel as if the scales have fallen from my eyes."

"I'm glad you understand," Lord Wilfried said, his eyes creasing in a smile. "I debated approaching you like this, but I'm glad I did."

I smiled back, rose from my seat, and returned the sound-blocker. My mana had finished recovering.

The Ripples of Wilfried's Words

Come fourth bell, I packed away my belongings and left the classroom before anyone could speak to me. Kenntrips and Rasantark were waiting outside, as promised.

"Let us return, Lady Hannelore."

The relief I felt upon seeing them and my retainers made me realize how tense I had felt in the classroom without them.

Still, I cannot let my guard down until we reach the dormitory.

I took Rasantark's and Kenntrips's hands, as I had done that morning, and started walking. Though my classmates had seemed to understand the folly of challenging Dunkelfelger to bride-stealing ditter, the rest of the Academy still scrambled to be my suitors.

"You seem especially sharp-eyed, Lady Hannelore," Rasantark said, peering down at me.

That had certainly been my intention; I could not afford to show weakness to the other duchies. I was glad he had picked up on it—and he must have noticed, for his mouth curved in a broad grin.

"It is entirely as if you are at war," he continued. "I must admit, I am falling in love with you all over again."

"Where did that come from?!" I exclaimed, inhaling sharply and shooting him my fiercest glare. "Do not say things that will weaken the battle aura I am trying to exude!"

Rasantark's mood only seemed to brighten. The more frustrated I became, the less my anger reached him. "I'm afraid I must," he said. "Lady Cordula instructed me to always speak my mind."

"Cordula!"

"Did I not tell you to acclimate yourself to such flattery?" my head attendant asked. "Do not let such an innocent remark rattle you."

You did, but... should he really be making such comments in public, when so many students are returning for lunch?!

"It also serves to discourage others, so I'm afraid you must grow used to it," Kenntrips added, wearing the smile I had come to associate with his scheming. If he whispered sweet words to me as

well, I would surely react in a manner unbefitting an archduke candidate.

“Kenntrips, I forbid you from speaking further,” I said with a flat expression. “Rasantark, you must also remain silent until we reach the dormitory. Due perhaps to the tension I have endured today, I will not hesitate to use force, should that be necessary.”

I couldn’t let my suitors fluster me; I had just learned of a crucial problem with our ditter match being held at the Royal Academy. Suppressing my internal strife, I instructed my retainers on our return to the dormitory.

“Andrea, please prepare a meeting room,” I said. “There is something important I must discuss with the rest of my brother’s retainers after lunch. Kenntrips, Rasantark, I must ask that you assist her.”

“Understood.”

Rasantark blinked, and the grin vanished from his face. He must have understood this was no time to tease me. “You wish to discuss something important enough to warrant a meeting room?” he asked.

“Indeed. Please ensure it is fully soundproofed as well; I do not want Raufereg or the others to hear us before we have made a decision.”

At that, Kenntrips hardened as well.

We moved to a meeting room immediately after lunch. The area-affecting sound-blocker, on top of everything else, made it clear how tight security was. I looked over my brother’s retainers, wearing a stern expression, and they all turned equally serious.

“I realized something of grave importance in class today,” I said. “The duchies that have not challenged us might yet ally with those that have, offering reinforcements or even injecting themselves into the battle. The match is to be held under the Zent’s supervision, which means our common sense might not hold. We must not treat it lightly.”

“What in the world happened...?”

I repeated what Lord Wilfried had told me.

“What?!” Heilliese cried. “Ehrenfest is teaming up with Drewanchel?!”

“But why would Lord Wilfried side with Lord Ortwin on this matter?” Rasantark asked.

"I, too, was taken aback by the news," I said, glad to see that they shared my confusion. "Under normal circumstances, the challengers and their families would have to come to Dunkelfelger, removing the threat of unwanted intervention. But this match is to be held at the Royal Academy. If someone wished to conspire with our foes, they could travel to their dormitories by highbeast, or even meet with them in tea party rooms."

Every face in the room stiffened. It would be so much harder to claim victory if our opponents were forging secret alliances, especially when there were already so many duchies challenging us.

"Is this to say Ehrenfest intends to oppose us?" Kenntrips asked, narrowing his eyes.

I shook my head. "That much is not clear. Perhaps they are simply confused, like how the other duchies mistook their challengers for suitors."

"This bride-stealing ditto match is a battle not between students but between Dunkelfelger's archducal family and the families of its challengers," Cordula said. "If they do not understand that fundamental fact, then indeed, further complications could arise."

Everyone looked exhausted as they thought back to all the misunderstandings that had plagued our match with Ehrenfest.

"We should seek confirmation from someone other than Lord Wilfried," I said. "Ehrenfest is our ally, and I should not like to think they have forgotten that."

Not even a year had passed since we joined the Defense of Ehrenfest. If their gratitude had truly ended with their celebratory feast, and they intended to ally with Drewanchel against us, then we would have much to think about.

"I am reluctant to jump to any unfortunate conclusions," I explained. "However, as I understand many of you are suspicious of Ehrenfest, I would like to send a letter to Lady Charlotte to confirm their intentions."

"Indeed, that sounds wise," Kenntrips said. "I doubt Lady Rozemyne or Lord Ferdinand would do anything so treacherous, but we should find out where we stand before Ehrenfest attempts to rope them into this."

I nodded. We could manage Ehrenfest on its own, but not if we also had to fight Lady Rozemyne with her Grutrisheit or Lord Ferdinand with his fathomless scheming. It would be ideal if we

could avoid butting heads with Ehrenfest entirely.

“Furthermore,” I continued, “I intend to inform the Zent of the dangers that might come with this match being held at the Royal Academy. It is my hope that if I inform her that other duchies might be forging alliances, she will take action to prevent it. Nobody would be better suited to handle such matters.”

“Understood. We shall inform the aub of today’s events,” Kenntrips said, then gathered with the other scholars. An ordonnanz entered the room barely a moment later and perched on Cordula’s wrist.

“This is the teleportation hall,” said the little white bird. “A letter for Lady Hannelore has arrived from the aub.”

“I shall come at once,” my head attendant replied, returning the ordonnanz to its sender. She noted that the matter must be urgent for a letter to have come straight after lunch, then left to fetch it for me.

As I awaited Cordula’s return, I summarized the contents of our meeting and wrote to Lady Charlotte in the meantime.

“It’s as if they were here with us,” my head attendant opined as she came back into the room, letter in hand. “It would seem those back home are wary that, since the match has been moved to the Royal Academy, the other duchies might seek support from noncontenders.”

I skimmed the letter.

I see. They must have learned this from a past encounter with Lord Ferdinand.

Father’s correspondence echoed many of our own concerns—that most duchies were confusing bride-stealing ditter for treasure-stealing ditter, and that the greater duchies might receive support from lesser and middle duchies as a result. He was especially concerned that we might be up against a great, unified offensive.

Dunkelfelger had stipulated that, if the match was to be held at the Royal Academy, the Zent would need to do her utmost to prevent other duchies from working together or acquiring the aid of nonparticipants. Father’s writing made his stance perfectly clear.

“If we detect any unwarranted assistance, we will start using lethal magic tools and slaughter all who dare oppose us.”

I could already imagine the trouble this would cause Zent Eglantine.

Still, we must avoid the worst-case scenario of having to take on

every one of our contenders at once.

Bride-stealing ditto was not meant to involve multiple challengers or be held outside the prospective bride's duchy. It was only natural that we were on guard.

"Cordula, send this letter to Zent Eglantine posthaste," I said. "There is much we will need to consult on before we inform the other duchies."

"Understood."

I passed the letter to my head attendant, then sighed. "Father has noticed the danger of other duchies working together, but he said nothing of Raufereg. Do he and the others think nothing of the danger he poses? Could they still be debating the matter?"

"Lord Raufereg might be an archduke candidate, but the threat he poses is minor at best," Rasantark noted, to the agreement of the other knights. "Were this happening five years from now, it might be more concerning, but he is reasonably harmless in his current state."

I gave a wry smile. He was far from a capable fighter—my duel with him had made that clear enough.

"Certainly, defeating Raufereg on his own is simple, and it should suffice where internal affairs are concerned," I said.

"Factional allegiances are clear to see, making it easy to weed out those who might oppose my brother in the future. My concern is that Raufereg might form secret alliances with other duchies."

The knights stared at me, nonplussed. My conversation with Lord Wilfried had opened their eyes to the risk of unrelated duchies involving themselves, but what would they do if Raufereg noticed his opportunity and sought to capitalize on it?

"Lady Hannelore," one interjected, "no matter how dire the situation might be, an archduke candidate of Dunkelfelger would never seek another duchy's aid for something as sacred as bride-stealing ditto."

As admirable as it was to place trust in Dunkelfelger's archduke candidates, this was Raufereg we were dealing with. We could not put too much faith in him.

"Under normal circumstances, I would not even consider it," I said. "Here at the Royal Academy, however, who knows what those driven to desperation might do? Raufereg is still young, and he has shown a tendency to charge toward his desires without much thought for the consequences. If he worked with other duchies to

seize victory, would those same duchies not then have a hold on us?"

It was one thing to consider other duchies' influence when choosing a partner, but letting those same duchies determine the outcome of a match meant to decide my husband was out of the question. And yet, Raufereg's faction was so weak that they had no other choice.

"I see," Kenntrips mused, wearing an exceptionally bright smile. "This provides logical grounds upon which to destroy Lord Raufereg. I shall consult the aub on this matter and, with his permission, pull this weed up by the roots before the ditler match begins."

Rasantark grinned just as broadly, smacking his fellow suitor on the back. "As the next archduke, it's Lord Lestilaut's duty to prevent other duchies from having undue influence on Dunkelfelger, right? That should light a fire under him."

"Light a fire under him"? That isn't quite how I would phrase it, but indeed, we should resolve this issue without delay. Let us go."

I started to feel a little sorry for Raufereg. Whenever Kenntrips and Rasantark involved my elder brother in their schemes, they ended up causing far more damage than intended. Part of me wished they would restrain themselves, but I held my tongue and simply watched them pen their letter. Raufereg had dug himself into this hole by opposing the aub.

"You sound so much like an archduke candidate, milady," Cordula said.

"Please do not tease me."

"I mean only to praise your growth."

As the conversation died down, it came time for afternoon classes. Several of my retainers had finished their lessons during my slumber, leaving them with more free time than usual, so I entrusted my letter for Lady Charlotte to one such scholar.

"Elusia, you have no more afternoon classes, correct?" I asked. "Please deliver this letter to Lady Charlotte posthaste. Could you stress its urgency? I imagine it will lead to another meeting between duchies."

"You may count on me. Every single Ehrenfest student has finished their shared written lessons by now, so she should be in her dormitory."

On that note, I proceeded to my next class, impressed that my

scholars were so knowledgeable.

My afternoon lessons concluded without incident. I was glad to have confirmed how other duchies felt about bride-stealing ditter and to have sent my findings to the Zent. If anyone asked me about the match, I could tell them to wait for her official statement.

And to have received praise from Cordula, of all people, I truly must have grown.

“Lady Hannelore, could today be the day you grace me with your special training?!” Raufereg asked upon my return, not even bothering to greet me. I could not stand his tenacity and abject lack of decorum.

“I advise you to pass your court etiquette classes first,” I replied, dismissing him with a smile. I had already entrusted his fate to those back home, so I thought it best to leave him to his own devices until they replied.

“That again?” Raufereg pouted. “You know the professor is particularly harsh on archduke candidates, don’t you?”

How strange. I give him the same refusal time and time again, yet he never seems to understand me.

It seemed obvious to me that when I insisted he focus on his etiquette classes, what I really meant was that he was being so obscenely rude that he needed to relearn politeness from the ground up. Surely he had heard the phrase often enough to suspect a double meaning and, at the very least, to consult his retainers.

Or do even they not know what I mean?

Raufereg’s lack of comprehension was so strange that I shot his head attendant a curious look. “It would seem someone has not been praying to Erwachlehen the God of Guidance as much as he perhaps should.”

“No matter how Flutrane might exert herself, Tarkus grows only beneath Verfuheremeer.”

In other words, no matter how much Raufereg’s educators devoted themselves to his education, he was ill-suited to being an archduke candidate. It surprised me to think his own head attendant had given up on him—though a small part of me had suspected as much. It had not escaped my notice that Raufereg received fewer lectures at the Academy than he had in the northern building.

I suspect his head attendant has already consulted Father and his

second wife, Lady Reichlene, on the matter. Perhaps their reply will come sooner than I thought.

“Dregarnuhr the Goddess of Time should weave her threads in due time,” I said, unsure how else to respond.

“Indeed, I pray for that day to come,” the head attendant concluded with a courteous bow, then started ushering Raufereg away. The overeager archduke candidate exclaimed, “If not today, then when?!” as they went.

The head attendant’s hard work was going unrewarded, it seemed. It was a sorry sight. I even sympathized with Raufereg, to a degree.

“If only Lady Reichlene had put her foot down before he entered the Royal Academy...” I muttered. “It might have saved us all this trouble.”

An archduke candidate deemed unfit for their status could be reduced to the rank of archnoble. If we had demoted Raufereg before he enrolled at the Royal Academy, the other duchies would not have paid it any mind—but doing it now would make him the subject of any number of rumors.

“Perhaps she thought a path might open for him, since Lord Lestilaut was chosen as the next aub despite his defeat, and you restored your reputation through true ditter,” Cordula mused aloud. If my brother and I, the children of the duchy’s first wife, had been given chances to redeem ourselves, the son of its second wife would be entitled to the same mercy.

My head attendant sighed. “If only we could contain Lord Raufereg’s shame within the duchy. For the sake of interduchy diplomacy, we cannot leave him be any longer. I fear people might blame you for not being able to keep the dormitory in order on your own.”

“Well, they would probably have a point,” I said. “My attempt to educate him seems to have made him even worse.”

“At least there is no doubt of your martial prowess,” Cordula replied with a smile.

I retired to my room and changed clothes for our evening meal. But just as I was about to leave for the dining hall, an ordonnanz swooped in and came to rest on my hand.

“Lady Hannelore, this is Charlotte of Ehrenfest,” the bird said, relaying a quavering voice. “Your letter was exceptionally helpful. Thank you, from the bottom of my heart. Please also allow me to

apologize for my brother's careless words and the distress they have caused you. Let it be known that Ehrenfest neither knew of nor sanctioned his intent to support another duchy in the upcoming ditler match. We have not forgotten our debt to Dunkelfelger for helping to protect our home. Our aub will send a formal apology—but before then, I wished to dispel any notions that we might side with Drewanchel against you. Please pass that assurance on to Aub Dunkelfelger as well.”

For her ordonnanz to have reached me so quickly, Lady Charlotte must have rushed to interrogate Lord Wilfried upon his return from his afternoon classes. My letter must have come as quite the shock to her if she had known nothing of her brother's intentions.

Relieved we would not have to fight Ehrenfest, I tapped the ordonnanz stone to send my reply.

“Lady Charlotte, this is Hannelore. Thank you for putting our minds at ease. I look forward to when we next find time for a tea party together. As soon as Aub Ehrenfest's letter arrives, I shall pass it along to my father. Please send him my regards.”

As the bird departed, I made for the dining hall with a spring in my step. I had ascertained Ehrenfest's intentions and confirmed that they had not suddenly turned against us. Today's food would taste even better than usual.

Still, I wonder... If Lord Wilfried does not have his duchy's support, in what way was he hoping to assist Lord Ortwin? Was he offered a Drewanchel wife, perhaps?

It was not uncommon to search for a partner in one's fifth year. Not to mention, it would explain why he asked Lord Ortwin to accompany us to the gazebo, and why he could not agree to marry me. It would even justify his acting as if I had never proposed to him in the first place.

If not for that, he would never have put his full support behind Lord Ortwin, knowing he was opposing his duchy's intentions. By the time I proposed, he was no doubt already...

“Try not to let your mind wander, Lady Hannelore.”

Cordula's warning snapped me back to my senses, and I realized I had finished eating. I had no memory of even touching my food, yet the plate before me was empty. My thoughts were still catching up when an announcement sounded through the dining hall.

“A magic letter for the dormitory supervisor has arrived.”

I turned just in time to see the letter float down onto Professor Rauffen's table. For it to have arrived during dinnertime, its message must have been intended for the whole dormitory.

"It's from the Zent!" our supervisor boomed, drawing the attention of every single person in the dining hall. He read the letter, then declared, "Every student of archnoble rank or greater, gather in the auditorium at third-and-a-half bell tomorrow. Zent Eglantine has an urgent announcement, it seems—presumably about the upcoming ditler match."

I had thought the Sovereignty would take longer to debate the matter, but it seemed the Zent intended to accept my father's terms as they were.

"We won't be the only duchy there," Professor Rauffen said. "Be sure to guard Lady Hannelore well."

"Understood!" the knights chorused, as enthusiastic as ever.

The Zent's Announcement

I entered the auditorium at exactly third-and-a-half bell, surrounded by my suitors and retainers. I was still attracting a lot of attention as the second divine avatar—much to my frustration—so my retainers had advised me to leave later than I normally would, to minimize contact with other duchies.

“Look, it’s Lady Hannelore.”

“To think the Goddess of Time descended into her...”

Though I drew plenty of stares, my circle of retainers ensured no one would approach me. The others’ whispers still reached me, however—and as our seats were at the very front of the room, I overheard all manner of remarks.

“What could possibly have motivated the Zent to gather all students of archnoble rank and above?” one asked.

“Was it not Lady Rozemyne the gods summoned...?” pondered another.

“This must have something to do with Dunkelfelger. But what, exactly?”

“It can’t be about the goddess. The upcoming ditter match, maybe?”

Don’t blame us. You’re the ones who issued the challenges.

Biting back my complaints, I continued toward our seats. Not all duchies had equal access to information, and there was no need for me to correct them when the Zent was about to clear up any confusion.

“Lady Hannelore,” came a voice from among the Ehrenfest students. Lady Charlotte stepped toward me, her expression rigid.

“State your business,” Raufereg demanded, lowering into a combat stance despite not even being one of my guards. It was behavior unbecoming of an archduke candidate, and the very thought of what the other duchies might think made my head ache.

“I understand your concern, Raufereg, but stand down,” I said.

“But—”

“I shall speak with Lady Charlotte. Those of you unrelated to

this matter, proceed to your seats.”

As I told the boy to leave us be, the voices around us grew louder.

“I could understand her knights being on guard, but what was that boy thinking, threatening a fellow archduke candidate over something so trivial?”

“Was it really wise to approach Dunkelfelger, knowing how guarded they are? Is Ehrenfest going to be okay?”

Lord Wilfried tugged on Lady Charlotte’s cape. “Do you have to do this now?” he asked, hoping to avoid making even more of a scene. “Can it not wait?”

“No, it cannot,” Lady Charlotte replied, swiping away his hand and taking another step toward me. “The sooner we apologize, the better.”

“Could this be about yesterday?” I asked. Given her response to Lord Wilfried, I could only assume she had the letter from Aub Ehrenfest.

“Indeed. I thought it best to give you this posthaste. Forgive us for the trouble we caused you and the rest of Dunkelfelger.”

At once, Lady Charlotte instructed one of her apprentice scholars to present the letter. I turned to my own apprentice scholar Luitpold, who nodded and stepped forward to accept it.

“I thank you ever so much for your fast response,” I said. “I—or rather, we of Dunkelfelger—accept Ehrenfest’s apology.”

Truly, I wanted nothing more than to remain on good terms with Ehrenfest. I still wondered what Lord Wilfried had meant when he said he fully intended to support Lord Ortwin in the upcoming ditler match—but as long as we weren’t losing a dear ally to Drewanchel, I was satisfied.

Still, I see Lady Charlotte is acting as Ehrenfest’s public representative, not Lord Wilfried.

I wondered how many in the auditorium had noticed the change since the year before. Then I remembered the look on Lord Wilfried’s face when he had said no one wanted him to be the next aub, and bitterness welled within me.

“Zent Eglantine shall now enter,” one of the Sovereign scholars announced after our students had all taken their places in the front row.

Right on cue, the Zent made her entrance, wearing a long white dress with red accents. Lord Anastasius was escorting her. She took

to the stage, confirmed that the students of all duchies were present, and then began.

“It is imperative that you report what you hear today to your aubs. Normally, I would extend this announcement only to the relevant duchies, but I have gathered you all today as a result of extenuating circumstances. There are misconceptions at play that have led young men to unjustly consider themselves suitors, so I think it best that I clarify. Moreover, I wish to inform you that the duchies not involved in the upcoming ditto match will need to abide by certain terms of conduct.”

She paused, considering her next words carefully.

“Our current situation began when Dregarnuhr the Goddess of Time descended to summon Lady Rozemyne to the world of the gods, taking control of Lady Hannelore’s body to deliver the summons. Many of you likely witnessed this event at the gazebo behind the scholar building.”

I doubted that was truly the case, since most of the witnesses had come from the scholar building. With Lord Wilfried’s, Lord Ortwin’s, and my own retainers surrounding the gazebo, and the goddess’s divine power keeping everyone at a distance, I suspected that very few had actually seen her descent.

“Dregarnuhr’s arrival resulted in Lady Hannelore being heralded as the second divine avatar, inciting many to challenge Dunkelfelger to bride-stealing ditto in hope of obtaining her hand.” Zent Eglantine cast a leisurely look across the entire auditorium, her eyes lingering on the duchies who had challenged us. “I fear too many of you acted in haste, not realizing how serious bride-stealing ditto truly is.”

Zent Eglantine then explained the nature of the contest. Such challenges were issued by men so consumed by love that they would defy even a woman’s father to claim her. Those competing for my hand were defying Aub Dunkelfelger himself, making them his enemies, not my suitors. Worse still, the match they were about to play was far more serious than the speed ditto of our classes. Though it resembled treasure-stealing ditto, it involved the families of both the bride and the challenger, and it was treated so gravely that deaths were not uncommon.

With each revelation, the audience groaned. Some insisted they hadn’t known it was that kind of ditto, while others bemoaned having unknowingly offended the country’s top-ranking duchy. Our

own students were no less taken aback.

“How could the other duchies be so naive?”

“To think they were unaware they were attempting to *steal* a bride.”

It really had been wise to make sure everyone was on the same page.

“Traditionally, the rules of bride-stealing ditto would require the match to be held in Dunkelfelger,” Zent Eglantine explained. “However, because there are so many duchies involved, and the risk of death is so high, I have spoken with Aub Dunkelfelger and arranged for it to be held at the Royal Academy instead, under my supervision.”

A stir ran through the crowd; most had assumed the match would be held at the Royal Academy to begin with. Back in Dunkelfelger, ditto was played regularly for both training and pleasure, and we seemed to be the exception on that front.

Our culture really does differ from that of other duchies.

“Since bride-stealing ditto is fought between the families of those involved, and these challenges concern the hand of a Dunkelfelger archduke candidate, Aub Dunkelfelger informed me of his intent to mobilize his Knight’s Order. I declined, as that would have made the conflict too large in scale. As all the challengers are archduke candidates, only their guard knights and their duchies’ archducal families may participate.”

Normally, there would be no restrictions on who could participate, but Zent Eglantine was enforcing one—just as she had with magic tools. I was as surprised as everyone around me.

“Only guard knights and archducal families?” Kenntrips repeated with a grimace. My retainers looked equally troubled and were quick to mutter among themselves.

“The Knight’s Order won’t be mobilized, even with Lady Hannelore’s hand at stake?”

“I understand that a large-scale ditto match would cause problems at the Royal Academy, but this rule places Dunkelfelger at a clear disadvantage, since we’re facing multiple duchies.”

“But for Zent Eglantine to announce it here, Father must have given his approval...” I said. “Does he really trust us to win, even with our numbers and the strength of our weaponry so restricted?”

“It won’t even be a challenge,” Rasantark declared with a smirk. I wondered what made him so sure.

"Of course," Zent Eglantine continued, "since bride-stealing ditter is fought between families, each challenger and their aub will be required to take part."

Cries of shock and horror filled the auditorium.

"Is it not too dangerous for aubs and archduke candidates to participate?"

"She did specify that guard knights would take part, not apprentice knights in general..."

Rasantark thumped his chest. "No archducal family is as well trained as ours." It was nice to see him so certain, but I found it hard to agree.

I mean, how many times have we lost to Lord Ferdinand and Lady Rozemyne?

The pair had spent so much of their lives in the temple, yet they had still managed to beat us at ditter. I saw no reason to assume our victory was guaranteed when other duchies could have prodigies of their own.

"This is all well and good, but... did Ehrenfest and Dunkelfelger not hold a bride-stealing ditter match entirely between students?" asked a member of another duchy.

"Is this not strange?" a second voice added. "Archducal families weren't made to participate then, so why are they being involved now?"

Goodness me... Would it not be more strange for the would-be suitor to sit out, leaving apprentice knights to fight the battle for them?

I could feel my head start to throb. My brother's deception had only sown further confusion among the other duchies. Still, since he had issued the challenge for his bride-stealing ditter match—and since he, Lady Rozemyne, and Lord Wilfried had all participated—it technically met the requirement that members of both families take part.

Ngh... Our culture is far too unique.

If we followed Zent Eglantine's rules, the upcoming match would involve Lord Ortwin and Aub Drewanchel. Lord Sigiswald would also have to fight, acting as Aub Korinthsdaum—and the small size of his archducal family would put him on the back foot. Not even his father, Lord Trauerqual, would be able to support him; the former king was the aub of another duchy and was in no position to speak on his son's marital affairs.

On our side, Father and I would naturally need to participate.

And as this was a battle between families, my brother would surely also take part as the next aub. Even my uncles and grandfather were said to have been training with more fervor than usual.

They must be especially fired up after not getting the chance to join true ditter. I assume Grandfather will end up having to stay behind.

When Lady Rozemyne had invited us to true ditter, we had not known whether she truly had royal permission. For safety's sake, Dunkelfelger had decided to send someone they could easily cut ties with if the worst came to pass, which was why they had trusted me to lead our knights. In this case, however, our entire archducal family would need to gather as one. We would need to bring our full might to bear to defeat our many challengers, so not even the women of our family were trying to cool the men's enthusiasm.

"The match shall be held at third bell on the day after the graduation ceremony, to allow the relevant parties time to gather at the Royal Academy," Zent Eglantine said. "Those who wish to rescind their challenge may contact Aub Dunkelfelger at the Interduchy Tournament. I would advise taking that opportunity to apologize for your rudeness. Though you acted out of ignorance, you openly opposed his decision for his daughter's hand in marriage."

There were many relieved sighs at the news that backing out was an option. Rasantark muttered that it seemed we would face fewer opponents than anticipated, which I took for a good thing—but my retainers seemed to think otherwise.

"Does this not mean we won't know our opponents until the time of the Interduchy Tournament?"

"How are we meant to prepare ourselves?"

"It must be out of consideration for those of us already overwhelmed by the flood of questions and challenges."

"Yes, what a mess this whole situation has been. I, for one, am glad they will need to address the aub directly."

I noticed a particularly distant look in their eyes. The particulars were unknown to me, since everything had occurred while I was in my jureve, but our students had apparently been overrun with challenges and correspondence from the duchies vying for my hand.

"As the Zent, I shall arbitrate the signing of the ditter contracts, to ensure there is no unfairness on either side. Beyond the rules I specify, however, the match shall be held in accordance with

Dunkelfelger's standards. I will accept no complaints about any misconceptions that are discovered during the match itself."

Indeed, any confusion would need to be ironed out *before* both parties signed their contract. We had seen for ourselves what happened when two duchies rushed into playing without first ensuring they understood each other, and we refused to make the same mistake again.

"Even as the Zent, there is much I cannot answer about the peculiarities of ditler," Zent Eglantine went on. "Those of you with questions should consult Aub Dunkelfelger during the Interduchy Tournament."

She was no doubt busy herself—and as her own knowledge of ditler left a lot to be desired, she had elected to defer any further explanations to us.

"Now, I shall explain the special rules of the upcoming match," the Zent said. "As this battle will be fought between archducal families, I will restrict the lethality of all offensive magic tools to minimize casualties. Yet life is fragile, and even that cannot guarantee that no lives will be lost."

Murmurs of shock rippled through the room as other duchies realized their aubs or successors might perish in the battle.

"Furthermore, any duchies not taking part in the match are forbidden from offering assistance of any kind to those that are. Should I learn of such cooperation, I shall lift my restriction on the use of offensive magic tools. I will regard such actions as hostile not only to Dunkelfelger, but to me as well, as the match's arbitrator."

I noticed tremors among the duchies that had stood on the losing side of the civil war. Zent Eglantine's rise to power had blurred the line between "winners" and "losers," so they clearly wished to avoid drawing her ire and putting themselves back at a disadvantage.

With everything now explained, it seemed possible that every duchy that had issued a challenge might withdraw. Perhaps the bride-stealing ditler would end before it even began.

"Be absolutely sure to inform your aubs to direct any questions to Aub Dunkelfelger during the Interduchy Tournament," Zent Eglantine concluded. "I will not permit you to pester Lady Hannelore or the other students of Dunkelfelger over this matter. That is all."

On that note, the Zent departed. The other duchies now seemed

timid, openly avoiding eye contact with Dunkelfelger students. It was the opposite of how they had acted upon entering the auditorium, which, to me, was a considerable relief.

“You seem in a good mood, Lady Hannelore,” Rasantark said.

I chuckled and whispered to my escorts, “Of course. Now there are no uncouth eyes upon me.”

“You would rather be feared and avoided...?” Kenntrips whispered back, eyeing those around us.

I scanned the room, considering his question, then nodded. “It does sadden me to see those I considered friends now afraid of me, but I was never one for attention. I much prefer this to being some spectacle to be gawked at.”

Many had acted unthinkably toward an archduke candidate of the country’s top-ranked duchy, staring at me without reservation and even trying to get past my guard knights to approach me. They must have considered such behavior acceptable due to the “reasonable” excuse of my being a divine avatar. Truly, people seemed to lose all restraint once they were part of a larger group.

“Furthermore,” I said, “this should reduce the burden on my knights, and the two of you will no longer have to escort me everywhere I go.”

To my surprise, Kenntrips and Rasantark stared at me in shock. I had expected them to be equally relieved.

“Um, Lady Hannelore... Do you not like us escorting you?”

“Oh, no! I simply thought it must be quite a bother for you, having to walk me to the archduke candidate course each day despite not being among my retainers. It is nowhere near the scholar or knight buildings, after all. I feel terrible about it.”

My retainers took turns escorting me based on when they were free, but Kenntrips and Rasantark always took me to my classes unless something extraordinarily urgent demanded their immediate attention. It meant they always had to rush to make it to their own classes on time, then leave early before they could socialize with other duchies.

“If you do not mind, then please allow us to continue,” Kenntrips said. “We are used to accompanying Lord Lestilaut, so it does not bother us at all.”

“Kenntrips is right,” Rasantark said, squeezing my right hand. “Even if we weren’t used to it, I would still want to spend every moment I can with you.”

“Rasantark...” I muttered, lost for words. I turned to my retainers, hoping someone would come to my rescue, but they only responded with smiles. They did not smack Rasantark’s hand away or even chastise him.

“You certainly are loved, Lady Hannelore,” one said.

“If Cordula were here, she would tell you not to get so flustered—to simply smile and move on,” Andrea added.

Smile... and move on?

Not wanting Cordula to scold me, I attempted to follow Andrea’s instructions. I could feel my smile was forced, but it was better than nothing.

“Rasantark,” I said, “we must resume walking.”

“If only time would stop and we could stay in this moment forever.”

“Eek!”

He held my hand even tighter, almost caressing it. So much for moving on.

“Come now, Rasantark. Do not trouble Lady Hannelore any further,” Kenntrips sighed, giving his fellow escort an admonishing tap on the head. Then he started to walk, keeping a firm grip on my left hand.

Rasantark grumbled, but he came along with us. At last, we were moving again.

“Kenntrips, I must ask that you aid me sooner next time,” I said.

“I shall try my best.”

We made it back to the dormitory just as the laynobles and mednobles were moving to the dining hall. It was time for lunch, and while my attendants were preparing my food, I repeated the Zent’s announcements to everyone. The grim looks on their faces brightened when they learned we might not be up against as many opponents as we had anticipated, and they eagerly chatted among themselves.

“Good thing we got the Zent on our side. Now I won’t have other students bothering me during class.”

“And thank goodness so many of our contenders are going to back out. A battle that lopsided would have been hard-fought.”

“This is all thanks to Lady Hannelore securing the Zent’s aid.”

The mood in the dining hall brightened. It felt good to be praised for having reached out to Zent Eglantine.

“Be sure to keep gathering information from the other duchies

in your classes,” I said. “The earlier we learn who plans to withdraw, the better prepared we shall be.”

“Understood!”

After a hearty lunch, it was time for the archduke candidate course. Kenntrips and Rasantark escorted me to class, as usual.

“Lady Hannelore, may I speak to you for a moment?” Lord Ortwin asked as soon as I entered the classroom.

I drew in a sharp breath despite myself. After everything the Zent had said, I had expected him to keep his distance.

“Do you have time after class?” he continued. “I can wait.”

Lord Ortwin glanced into the classroom, where I saw Lord Wilfried looking toward us with an apologetic expression. No doubt this concerned his promise to support Drewanchel, which directly contradicted Ehrenfest’s claim that it would play no part in the upcoming ditter match.

Professor Anastasius was due to arrive soon. If we started our conversation now and were interrupted at an awkward point, I would no doubt be too restless to focus on class.

“Allow me to ask one thing first,” I pressed. “Do you still intend to fight for my hand, even after everything the Zent said?”

“Of course,” Lord Ortwin replied, his light-brown eyes full of resolve. “Drewanchel fully understood bride-stealing ditter when we issued our challenge.” If that was true, our conversation would likely go on for some time.

“Then we may speak after class.”

Speaking with Ortwin

Ngh... This was a bad idea too.

I was so deathly curious what Lords Wilfried and Ortwin wanted to tell me that I spent the entire lesson keeping an eye on them, taking care to ensure our rejuvenation periods did not overlap. It was both exhausting and distracting; I could not focus on the class whatsoever.

I cannot bear to have my emotions toyed with any further. With this conversation, I shall settle matters with Drewanchel once and for all!

When Lord Ortwin first expressed his feelings for me, I intended to turn him down by stating that my father had already chosen my suitors. Yet here he was, declaring his intention to participate in bride-stealing ditter. Had the goddess's descent increased my value to his duchy?

I do not intend to lose, no matter what schemes Drewanchel resorts to.

When I did eventually step aside to recover my mana, I sent Cordula an ordonnanz explaining that Lord Ortwin wished to speak with me after class and requesting that she prepare Dunkelfelger's tea party room for us. I trusted she would inform Kenntrips and Rasantark, so I wouldn't need to worry about facing Lord Ortwin alone or being maneuvered into an unfavorable position.

Though it might not go perfectly, this should at least keep me from being on the back foot.

But as I rested, pleased with how I had handled things, Lord Ortwin began to approach me. I gathered my things and headed for the door, not wanting our conversation to take place in the classroom.

"Fear not, Lady Hannelore—I do not mean to speak with you here," Lord Ortwin assured me. "Come. We have prepared Drewanchel's tea party room."

He extended a hand to me, but I shook my head and left the classroom ahead of him. Outside, I took Rasantark's hand instead.

"We shall speak in Dunkelfelger's tea party room," I announced,

looking at Lord Ortwin over my shoulder. “I have no intention of going alone to the tea party room of a duchy that has challenged us to bride-stealing ditter.”

“Is *he* going to accompany us?” Lord Ortwin asked, frowning his brow in thought.

“I said we could talk, but not that we would be alone. If you cannot say what you wish to tell me in front of my suitor, then I would rather you not say it at all.”

Bride-stealing ditter was, as the name suggested, an attempt by one person to steal another person’s bride. Anything could happen—and against a foe who actually understood the nature of the game, we could not be more careful.

“I see,” Lord Ortwin said. “No wonder Aub Dunkelfelger issued his warning.”

“What did Father say?”

“I shall tell you in your tea party room. Now let us hurry—we have drawn enough attention already.”

I nodded and started toward the room my retainers were preparing, still with Rasantark as my escort. Lord Ortwin and his retainers followed a short distance behind. We were about halfway there when Cordula glanced back at me.

“Milady, what inspired this sudden meeting with Lord Ortwin? I would have thought it best to refuse him and reschedule for another day, to give us more time to prepare. As we speak, Kenntrips is rushing around to have everything ready for our arrival.”

I had wondered why only Rasantark came to meet me, and now I knew—Kenntrips was hard at work preparing for a battle of wits against Drewanchel.

“Though I could have refused him, I worried that it wouldn’t work and that he would approach me while I replenished my mana. I thought it better to speak with him in our tea party room than to risk facing him alone.”

With bride-stealing ditter on the horizon, it would have been exceptionally dangerous for me to speak with Lord Ortwin one-on-one. Even if I predicted what he wished to speak about, we would use sound-blockers, which meant nobody else would be able to hear us. He could make bold-faced lies about what we discussed, and there would be no way for me to prove him wrong.

“I should not give others such easy openings, no?” I concluded.

“A tea party room certainly is a better place to speak with him

than the classroom,” Cordula said with a nod of agreement.

Rasantark seemed less convinced. He was grabbing and releasing his cape with his free hand, as he always did when he was trying not to speak his mind.

“Rasantark, is there something you wish to say?” I asked.

“Ah...”

He awkwardly released his cape, then looked at me cautiously. “Could it be that you actually wish to go to Drewanchel, Lady Hannelore?” he asked, his chestnut eyes searching for the slightest reaction.

At once, I recalled how Kenntrips had said that if I truly wished to leave Dunkelfelger, I should consider accepting Lord Ortwin’s proposal. I must have made my suitors particularly uneasy.

“If that were my wish, I would have gone to Drewanchel’s tea party room or had this discussion in the classroom, where nobody could interfere. I do not wish to leave Dunkelfelger, I assure you.”

Rasantark sighed in relief as we arrived.

“Welcome back, Lady Hannelore. And welcome, Lord Ortwin,” my attendants said, ushering us to a round table inside the tea party room. Lord Ortwin sat across from me, while Rasantark took the seat to my right.

I gazed at the empty chair to my left just as Kenntrips entered from the dormitory. “Forgive my not being there to escort you after class, Lady Hannelore.”

“You need not apologize. How was Forsernte?”

“Her smile was dazzling.”

In other words, his attempt to gather information had borne fruit. Why, then, was his expression so comparatively grim—a smile lacking any strength whatsoever?

“Milady—we have opted to serve bettaritz tea for today’s gathering,” Cordula said, subtly urging me to focus not on Kenntrips but on Lord Ortwin, our guest.

To our knowledge, bettaritz was Lord Ortwin’s preferred choice of tea. It had a crisp flavor and was a popular choice among scholars trying to focus on their research. It was best enjoyed with honey, of which we had prepared two kinds.

“Lord Ortwin, would you prefer reva or kruve honey?” I asked.

“With my bettaritz? Reva, I suppose.”

Cordula stirred some reva honey into my tea. I took a demonstrative sip to prove it was safe, then bit into one of the

sweets we had served.

“As I do not have long, forgive me the discourtesy of getting straight to the point,” Lord Ortwin said. “I wish to know what you think of the upcoming ditto match, Lady Hannelore, and how the aub has presented it to you.”

“Come again?” I blinked at him, having not expected that in the slightest. “Is this not about Lord Wilfried openly declaring Ehrenfest would support you in the ditto match?”

This time, Lord Ortwin looked surprised. “That was his personal desire, not the will of his duchy. He explained the situation to me this morning—that his ambiguity was the source of your confusion—and apologized profusely. I understand that Ehrenfest has also formally apologized to Dunkelfelger. There is nothing for me to say to you about the matter.”

So he said, but I doubted Lord Wilfried would have made such a declaration in the first place unless he was goaded into it somehow.

“Do you mean to say Drewanchel never intended to cooperate with Ehrenfest?” I asked. “What was Lord Wilfried planning, then...?”

“Only he can answer that. Even if I wanted his assistance, Ehrenfest and Drewanchel have made no such arrangements. Now, I must ask again—what do you think of the upcoming ditto match?”

Lord Ortwin brushed aside my concern for his dealings with Lord Wilfried, returning to his original question, but even that struck me as problematic. Bride-stealing ditto was an attempt to force an unwanted union on a woman and her family; my thoughts on the matter should have been obvious.

“It was shocking to hear about upon my return from the world of the gods, and I consider it nothing but trouble,” I said.

“More specifically, has Aub Dunkelfelger offered no explanation whatsoever regarding Drewanchel?”

Not to my knowledge, no.

As I tried to recall the various reports I had read, Rasantark leaned forward across the table. “During and since Lady Hannelore’s coma, the aub has sent only instructions on how to prepare for the match and deal with further proposals. He has written nothing substantial about Drewanchel itself.”

Lord Ortwin frowned, contemplating the response.

“I wish to ask a question of my own,” I said. “When you first expressed your feelings for me, I rejected you on the grounds that

my father had already chosen my suitors.”

My words seized the attention of not just Lord Ortwin, but Kenntrips and Rasantark as well.

“I understand why one might covet a divine avatar, but I do not have powers to suit the title as Lady Rozemyne does,” I continued. “Trying to steal me away is not worth making an enemy of Dunkelfelger. Knowing that, will Drewanchel not rescind its challenge?”

I wished Lord Ortwin would concede. I would never be able to live up to the standard Lady Rozemyne had set.

“Do you not consider yourself a person of great value, Lady Hannelore?” he asked.

I saw no reason to. Yes, I was an archduke candidate of the country’s top-ranked duchy—and now the second divine avatar—but what was desirable about me personally? My timing was poor, I was constantly rebuked for my slow decision-making, my self-centered tendencies had driven a wedge between my retainers and me, and I was more or less oblivious to other people’s feelings. If there was anything the other duchies saw in me, it had to be...

“Is Drewanchel in need of mana?” I asked, looking up at Lord Ortwin. If nothing else, I had a mana capacity fit for a greater duchy.

He cast a look of displeasure at Kenntrips and Rasantark. “Lady Hannelore, you have both the caution to doubt others and the resolve to act upon your own desires. The strength you demonstrated in keeping your chin up even after losing that ditter match and earning your duchy’s ire is something I respect deeply.”

I froze, shocked to my core. No matter how desperately I racked my brain for a response, my mind was completely blank.

“You are being too expressive, milady.”

How else am I to react?!

My head attendant’s warning did nothing to snap me out of my stupor. I was much too embarrassed to worry about grace and decorum.

Don’t just point out my error—help me!

Though my unspoken pleas were directed at Cordula, it was Rasantark who came to my defense. He called Lord Ortwin’s name and rose to his feet, his expression grave.

“If you think Lady Hannelore’s strength ends there, then you truly know nothing about her, Lord Ortwin. She has battle prowess

befitting a Dunkelfelger archduke candidate. When she led our knights into true ditto, her performance was great enough to warrant praise from both Lord Ferdinand and Lady Rozemyne.”

Lord Ortwin said nothing, merely listening with a look of astonishment.

“Lady Hannelore often insists that she doesn’t excel at one particular weapon, but that’s because she’s talented with them all,” Rasantark continued. “The sharp look she levels at her foes, the pointedness of her spear thrusts, her courage in keeping her shield raised no matter how strong the foe... You have seen none of that beauty.”

“It seems you care only about her proficiency in battle,” Lord Ortwin retorted. “As her suitor, do you truly have nothing else to praise? Allow me to enlighten you on just how adorable Lady Hannelore can be.”

Their barrage of compliments was wearing down my mind. I brought my hands to my cheeks, trying to hide how much I was blushing, and frantically looked for anyone who could save me. Only one participant of our tea party remained entirely unfazed.

“Kenntrips, how can you just sit there...?” I asked.

“Would you like praise from me as well, Lady Hannelore?”

“I would rather you stop them!” I exclaimed, on the verge of crying.

Kenntrips must have noticed the tears in my eyes because he inhaled and made a small gesture with his hand. It must have been a signal of some kind, because Cordula reacted at once, prompting me to turn to her and wiping my eyes so quickly that neither Rasantark nor Lord Ortwin noticed.

My surprise overcame my embarrassment, calming my emotions somewhat. Kenntrips noticed as much and, at last, put a stop to the other boys’ contest.

“Rasantark, Lord Ortwin—though I understand your enthusiasm, such talk would best be saved for a separate meeting.”

Lord Ortwin cleared his throat and sat up straighter, recognizing the insinuation that he would be asked to leave unless he stayed on topic. “My apologies. What I mean to say is that Aub Dunkelfelger gave me permission to court Lady Hannelore.”

“Excuse me? Surely not,” I said, shaking my head. “No father would permit someone attempting to steal his daughter’s hand in marriage the chance to court her before the ditto match.”

“So you truly were not told...” Lord Ortwin replied with a troubled smile. “Dunkelfelger agreed not to protest if you come to Drewanchel of your own will during the match. Thus, your father instructed me to turn the contest from bride-stealing to bride-taking ditter.”

He spoke matter-of-factly, but I could hardly believe it. “A decision of that nature is far too important for my father not to have informed my suitors or me. And neither Kenntrips nor Rasantark knew, I assume.”

I turned to my suitors, who averted their eyes. “We might have heard as much while you were asleep,” Kenntrips said.

“Then why did you not tell me?”

“We determined there was no need, as you had no interest in Lord Ortwin. Rather, we thought it best to keep you from him, lest he attempt to misguide you. I did ask if you wished to move to Drewanchel.”

Rasantark nodded along in agreement.

He did, but...

“Did you wish to be seduced?” Rasantark asked. “If so, I can—”

“I should like no more of that talk here. I am simply disappointed that I was not properly informed.”

I do not “wish” to be seduced. It does the heart no good. Enough, I say!

Lord Ortwin scanned the room with deadly serious eyes. “It would seem, then, that Lady Hannelore is also unaware of Dunkelfelger’s quiet agreement with Drewanchel. Did that, too, reach no further than her suitors?”

““Quiet agreement”? What do you mean?” Rasantark asked, confused. Kenntrips merely furrowed his brow.

“Kenntrips,” I said, “do you know what Lord Ortwin means?”

“Yes, but I only found out today. The aub informed me by letter when I mentioned that Drewanchel wished to meet with us. He was going to tell us, but he was waiting to see how many duchies the Zent drove into resigning first.”

If what Kenntrips said was true, no wonder he had been so busy.

“Did the Zent not state that those who wished to resign should inform Aub Dunkelfelger during the Interduchy Tournament?” I asked. “Was Father going to wait that long to tell us?”

“As I understand it, several duchies used the emergency water

mirror to apologize and announce their resignation from the match.”

Apparently, the Zent’s instructions to speak with Father during the Interduchy Tournament were meant for students who wished to apologize in person or reach him by ordonnanz. The duchies that feared the consequences of angering Dunkelfelger had elected to use an emergency contact magic tool to apologize sooner.

“We have been told to tell Drewanchel which duchies have absconded from battle,” Kenntrips concluded.

“There is a secret agreement between our aubs, then...” I said. Lord Ortwin nodded.

“Then we might be here for quite some time. Allow us to pour you more tea.”

Our attendants refreshed our drinks, and I slowly sipped from my teacup. My head was still a mess with all this new information. I would need to buy as much time as I could muster.

I knew nothing of Father permitting Lord Ortwin to court me, or of a secret agreement between our duchies.

“Lady Hannelore, this is nothing for you to be so concerned about,” Kenntrips said. “This is a sudden meeting where intelligence gathering has been impeded. You need only to lend Lord Ortwin your ear.”

As nice as that was to hear, I could not help but feel a tad empty inside. Gone was my resolve to settle matters with Drewanchel for good. If our duchies had made a secret agreement, then our relationship would have to continue.

“As Kenntrips says, there is a critical gap in our knowledge. Should we postpone this meeting for another day?” Rasantark asked, perhaps anxious that our guest had taken control of the conversation. He might not have been so worried if Kenntrips had shared the news with us in advance, giving us time to prepare ourselves—but as it stood, he was clearly wary of Lord Ortwin and anxious that I might leave for Drewanchel.

“Rasantark, Father has instructed us to share intelligence with Drewanchel,” I said admonishingly, trying to cool my own head in the process. “We cannot end the meeting here. And should we not learn the true nature of this agreement now, so we can prepare ourselves appropriately?”

At last, I was back in control of my emotions. My heart had calmed enough that I could force a smile.

I must handle this in a manner befitting a Dunkelfelger archduke candidate.

“Tell us more of this secret agreement,” I said, looking Lord Ortwin in the eye. “Though I feel that I can predict a great deal of it...”

“Is that so?” he asked, blinking in surprise.

Truthfully, the nature of the agreement seemed obvious. “I assume our duchies will fight together to ease our burden of having to take on so many enemies at once. You will aid us in defeating Korinthsdaum and its allies, correct?”

“Indeed,” Lord Ortwin replied, smiling. “Korinthsdaum ranked highly this year due to Lord Sigiswald’s status as former royalty, but next year, its position will depend on its harvest and authority. It will not be able to maintain its current rank, which is exactly why Lord Sigiswald wishes to force a long-term relationship with Dunkelfelger while he still has status to depend upon.”

Zent Eglantine had acquired the Grutrissheit and risen to the highest seat in the country, while the other members of the former royal family had been demoted to aubs and such, receiving no further punishment for the invasion by Lanzenave. It was hard to say whether they would instantly be treated the same as other nobles, or if their fading authority would persist for another year. I personally felt that Lord Anastasius would go to great lengths to protect his family.

The survival of a newly formed duchy hinges on how well its archducal family can form bonds with other, more established ones.

Lord Sigiswald no longer had Drewanchel’s backing after divorcing Lady Adolphine, and his mother’s duchy, Gilessenmeyer, had plummeted in rank for being Raublut’s home. I could understand why the former prince was desperate to secure a new wife—and why the idea of marrying an archduke candidate from a top-ranking duchy was so alluring to him. With nothing but his wife’s duchy of Hauchletzte to lean on, he must have felt terribly exposed.

Even so, I wished he would set his sights elsewhere.

“This year, while Korinthsdaum is being treated as former royalty, not even Dunkelfelger the First can lightly turn down Lord Sigiswald’s proposals,” Lord Ortwin said. “Even if you reject him, others will scold you for slighting the honor of a former prince.”

“Klassenberg, especially, would seize the chance,” Kenntrips

added with a bitter frown. “Ever since we overtook them in the rankings, they’ve been itching to criticize us. They would insist we give aid to Korinthsdaum, no doubt. Aub Dunkelfelger expected that pressure, which is why he chose your potential partners from within our duchy. Any unwelcome proposals can be settled with bride-stealing ditter.”

An excellent move, indeed. Knowing how Lady Adolphine had been treated, I doubted I would ever have felt at home in Korinthsdaum. Dunkelfelger would also have faced constant calls for aid and cooperation. Using ditter to ensure that future never came to pass made perfect sense.

“Still, I am surprised Aub Drewanchel permitted you to challenge us,” I told Lord Ortwin. “I did not think he was one for ditter.”

As the duchy of knowledge, Drewanchel produced more scholars than anything else. I found it strange that the aub had agreed to a fight in which he would personally need to participate.

“He surely wished to unite with us, as Drewanchel would no longer be able to speak strongly against Korinthsdaum once all reparations were paid,” Kenntrips explained. “That is how much you are valued, Lady Hannelore.”

At once, he began listing my favorable attributes, counting them off on his fingers. I was an archduke candidate from Dunkelfelger, the duchy that had secured the Zent’s trust and risen to the top of the rankings. I had come to Ehrenfest’s aid in true ditter and was known as Lady Rozemyne’s close friend, since she had invited me to her inauguration. I had not let greed and pride blind me upon becoming the second divine avatar...

“Not to mention, Lord Ortwin seems the most likely candidate to win your heart,” Kenntrips concluded. “It would not be strange for Aub Drewanchel to see a significant chance for victory here.”

I furrowed my brow. Lord Ortwin was the “most likely candidate” to marry me? Whatever had given him that idea?

“Drewanchel is not only in a good position to negotiate with Dunkelfelger, being a fellow greater duchy, but it is also best suited to speak out against Korinthsdaum,” Kenntrips explained, doubtless having read my expression. “Furthermore, Lord Ortwin has spent much time with you as one of your peers, and your shared classes have given him plenty of chances to speak to you without interference from your retainers.”

Rasantark gave an emphatic nod, then shot a sideward glare at Cordula. “Not even I, one of your suitors, am permitted to speak with you in private.”

We’ve used sound-blockers, but I suppose we never cleared the room of retainers when doing so.

I stood corrected—Lord Ortwin was in an especially favorable position. I would need to be as careful with him going forward as I had been in class.

“Father permitted me to issue my challenge if—and only if—Dunkelfelger accepted our cooperation,” Lord Ortwin said.

“You meant to cooperate with us from the start...?” I asked. Did that not go entirely against the spirit of bride-stealing ditter?

“Indeed. If we had proposed it any later, it might have been mistaken for trickery. In return, I offered information about Korinthsdaum that Dunkelfelger would not have been able to acquire alone and promised to issue the first bride-stealing ditter challenge, forcing other duchies to do the same if they wished to propose to you.”

Korinthsdaum had made the first move, using the authority of past royalty to pressure us into accepting their proposal. Drewanchel’s challenge had disrupted their narrative, forcing Lord Sigiswald to shift into issuing his own challenge.

“Ideally, the former prince would have given up on you, but it seems he understood bride-stealing ditter as poorly as everyone else,” Lord Ortwin mused. “He told the lesser and middle duchies it was the perfect opportunity to forge good relations with Dunkelfelger and secure the second divine avatar for themselves, encouraging many to issue challenges of their own.”

“So *that’s* why half of Yurgenschmidt challenged us at once!” Rasantark exclaimed.

I could hardly blame him for his outrage; our entire dormitory had been thrown into chaos by the deluge of ditter challenges. And since bride-stealing ditter was traditionally held in the duchy to which the desired woman belonged, everyone had anticipated an all-out assault from half the country, including Klassenberg. Our defenseless commoners would be assaulted and our land ravaged; any victory of ours would come at a grave cost. It had led to much discussion and debate.

Of course, Lord Sigiswald had noticed none of that, convinced he had found the perfect chance to acquire the second divine

avatar. He had even encouraged more duchies to enter the fray, simply to improve his own chances of success.

“The authority afforded to former royalty truly is a nightmare,” I said, wanting nothing more than to massage my temples. I had never seen Lord Sigiswald as a threat, considering his clear lack of martial prowess and many failures during and after Lanzenave’s invasion. Evidently, that had been a mistake.

I am far too narrow-minded.

“Aub Dunkelfelger surely considered the situation from a broader political angle than we students,” Kenntrips said. “It is precisely because Drewanchel can speak against Korinthsdaum that he would have agreed to fight alongside them and share intelligence with them.”

The apprentice scholar wore a deep, contemplative frown as he spoke. Perhaps he had received some of that intelligence as well.

“Lord Ortwin, did you receive permission to use this opportunity to court Lady Hannelore?” Rasantark asked. He was keeping his composure, but I could guess from the slight twitching of his eyebrows that he was frustrated by how deftly Lord Ortwin had navigated the situation.

“Yes,” Lord Ortwin replied with a brisk nod. “Should I succeed in the endeavor, the match will ultimately become bride-taking ditter. Even if I do not, Dunkelfelger will support me in my push to become the next Aub Drewanchel.”

I was stunned by all the promises made to a duchy that had challenged us to bride-stealing ditter.

“Is that the extent of your secret agreement?” I asked.

“Once we have fought together to eliminate Korinthsdaum, we intend to build a long-term cooperative relationship. Dunkelfelger will support me, while Drewanchel will support Lord Lestilaut. In these turbulent times, when many successors are sure to be challenged on the grounds of their inferior schtappes, we must strengthen our positions against the next generation.”

It was already set in stone that my brother would become the next aub, since he had inherited the foundation while our knights engaged in true ditter, but not every Dunkelfelger noble had accepted him. To many, he had yet to fix the damage he had done to his reputation by losing a ditter match he himself had demanded. Their opposition had grown into a faction dedicated to making me the next aub, even to the point of backing Raufereg.

“With how much things are changing, I understand the importance of a long-term relationship,” I said—though I still did not fully agree with all that had happened. As far as I was concerned, we could have eliminated Korinthsdaum even without Drewanchel’s support.

Could it be that this was Father’s plan all along, to deflect Korinthsdaum and marry me into Drewanchel...?

Though I trusted Lord Ortwin, I felt there had to be more to the situation. Perhaps I was being paranoid.

“If I have sufficiently explained myself, may I ask what information Aub Dunkelfelger has given you?” Lord Ortwin ventured.

Rasantark and I knew nothing, and neither did my attendants. I turned to Kenntrips, the only one of us who had been in recent communication with my father.

“I have been instructed to share the duchies that have not yet rescinded their challenges,” he said. “As of now, that would be Korinthsdaum, Gilessenmeyer, Hauchletzte, and—of course—Drewanchel.”

To my relief, our opposition had shrunk to a third of its original might.

“Most of the lesser and middle duchies have resigned, then,” I said. “I did not expect so many to back down.”

Lord Ortwin smiled. “They issued their challenges with no understanding of bride-stealing ditto, having allowed Lord Sigiswald to instigate them. It is only natural that they withdrew, though I find it most regrettable that they allowed themselves to be swayed in the first place.”

“As do I,” Kenntrips said with a chilly expression. “It was wise of me to spread the rumor that apologizing sooner would better allow them to save face.”

I wonder if all scholars think the same way.

As I concluded that I would never be able to use my head as they did, Rasantark fell into thought. “Our remaining opponents must have a secret alliance, no?” he asked, no doubt considering the situation from the perspective of a knight.

“Indeed. Gilessenmeyer might be the home duchy of Lord Sigiswald’s mother, but Raublut’s role in Lanzenave’s invasion caused its rank to plummet. Now it’s searching for any opportunity to claw its way back up. And then there is Hauchletzte, the home

duchy of the former prince's wife, Lady Nahelache. It would be wise to assume both have allied with Korinthsdaum."

"Kenntrips, is that all the intelligence you were given?" I asked. "Did Father say anything else?"

He shook his head. If there was nothing more to be said, then the natural course of action was to wrap up our meeting. We had thrown it together abruptly, and it was getting late.

"In that case, Lord Ortwin..."

And yet, before I could say another word, our guest rose to his feet and circled around the table toward me.

"Um... Lord Ortwin?"

"As it stands, it must seem like I proposed purely for the benefit of my duchy," he said, his light-brown eyes gazing straight into mine. There was a small box in his hand that had appeared from seemingly nowhere.

My heart raced. I shot to my feet, overcome with both an urge to flee and a warning not to let him finish whatever he was about to say.

"Lord Ortwin," Rasantark said, moving between us, "Lady Hannelore has said she will not move to Drewanchel. I ask that you refrain from bothering her further."

"Stand aside," Lord Ortwin said without even glancing at him. "If I can defeat Korinthsdaum and win Lady Hannelore's heart, the match will ultimately be recognized as bride-taking ditter. I have no reason to heed demands from her suitors."

"And I have no reason to heed demands from someone who *isn't* her suitor."

The young men glared at each other, each refusing to back down.

What should I do?! What is one meant to do in a situation like this?!

A small voice in my head urged me to turn tail and run, but such rudeness was beyond me. I searched desperately for something I could say to stop them, but nothing came to mind.

Save me, Cordula!

I waved to her behind my back, beckoning her for aid. She approached, whispered, "Do as your heart wills," and then returned to her former position.

Is that all you have to say?! That was the last thing I wanted to hear!

My head attendant had abandoned me. But as my body started to tremble, Kenntrips passed by me and grabbed his fellow suitor by the shoulders.

“Stop this, Rasantark. That is enough.”

“Why’re you allying with Lord Ortwin?!” Rasantark barked, eyes wide with disbelief.

Kenntrips sighed. “I am *not* allying with him. Take a deep breath and remember that you are facing an archduke candidate. And in any case—this is Lady Hannelore’s decision to make, not yours.”

As he was forcibly dragged away, Rasantark looked at me with pleading eyes. I could almost hear him ask, “You *will* refuse him, right?”

“Lady Hannelore,” Lord Ortwin said, approaching me again. He came as close as my apprentice guard knights and other retainers—who had moved to encircle me—would allow, then knelt and opened the box.

That’s a courtship magic tool!

I gasped at the sight of the metallic ornament set with elemental feystones.



“Ever since Dregarnuhr the Goddess of Time wove our threads together, I have heard the blooming of schmelmums.”

Wait! Does he really mean to say he’s had feelings for me since we first met?!

I clasped my hands, desperate to hide my floundering heart.

“I thought you were one to walk the path lit by Sterrat the God of Stars, yet you seized Liebeskhilfe’s threads yourself. Geduldh’s red is more vivid than it first appeared.”

My stomach was in knots. The very thought of him having watched me for so long made my cheeks burn.

“I know not why you released one such thread, but Mestionora chose Schutzaria over Geduldh due to Ewigeliebe’s visits. My thread is here. If my wish may be granted, might I ask to hold yours?”

My eyes flitted between Lord Ortwin and the magic tool. Every eye in the room was on me: Lord Ortwin quietly awaited my answer; Rasantark silently urged me to decline; Kenntrips wore a look of resignation, as if he had known this would happen; and my retainers prepared to judge whether my answer was fitting for a Dunkelfelger archduke candidate.

No matter what, I must speak clearly.

I stopped clenching my hands, placing them carefully on top of each other as I drew a steadying breath.

“I cannot accept. I do not yet know enough to make a decision. Please give me time to consult my father.”

Lord Ortwin closed the box, looking surprisingly relieved. “I eagerly await the next time Dregarnuhr the Goddess of Time weaves our threads together,” he said, then stood and left the tea party room with his retainers.

Returning to Dunkelfelger

“Lady Hannelore! What was that?! Why did you not simply refuse him?!” Rasantark shouted. He had shown enough restraint to wait for the door to close, but that was the extent of his patience.

“As I told Lord Ortwin, I do not know enough to make a final decision,” I said, directing my response at both him and my troubled retainers. “Cordula, make arrangements for me to return to Dunkelfelger on Earthday. I wish to speak with Father.”

Rasantark merely looked at me, sadness in his eyes.

Ngh... Please, look away.

He gazed upon me like a pet pleading its owner to stay. It felt too cruel to simply walk past him, so I turned to him a second time.

“You seem displeased with my decision, Rasantark, but Father is trying to build a strong, mutually beneficial relationship with Drewanchel. If I had simply refused, it might have caused problems for my brother, the next archduke.”

Rasantark grunted and fell silent. As my brother’s retainer, he could not merely disregard such a significant risk. Leaving my answer ambiguous had been the best move I could make.

“The amount of help we can get from Drewanchel drastically depends on whether they have my hand,” I said. “Why, then, did you hide that Father gave Lord Ortwin permission to court me?”

Rasantark looked me dead in the eye. “I hid nothing.”

“You told me Father said nothing about Drewanchel in particular. Was that a lie?”

“No. You were unconscious.”

“Rasantark,” Kenntrips interjected, placing a hand on the apprentice knight’s shoulder as he inserted himself between us, “speaking so obtusely will only confuse her further. Lady Hannelore, it is true that the aub spoke to us, though he said only that some would seek to turn bride-stealing ditter into bride-taking ditter. He warned us to stay on our guard as your suitors, but he did not specify any duchy or person in particular.”

“Is that to say he did not grant special permission to

Drewanchel or Lord Ortwin?" I asked.

"Indeed," Kenntrips replied, nodding. Rasantark had neither been lying nor mistaken.

"We thought it somewhat redundant to report that the aub instructed us to protect you," Rasantark concluded.

"Yes, I suppose that makes sense," I said. My suitors would have shielded me from other men whether my father requested it or not, and it would only have troubled me to learn someone sought bride-taking ditter so soon after waking up.

"When we considered who might try to seduce you, Lord Ortwin was the first person who came to mind, since he had already confessed to you in class," Kenntrips continued. "Yet the aub said nothing about him specifically."

"If that is true, then it seems rather dishonest for Lord Ortwin to have said Father granted him permission to court me." I was skeptical, but I doubted he would tell a lie we could disprove with a single question to my father. As I pondered the situation, Kenntrips suddenly spoke up in realization.

"Ah. This is merely an assumption, but perhaps Aub Dunkelfelger taunted Lord Ortwin to the tune of 'try to court her if you can,' which he and Aub Drewanchel then interpreted in a way that was favorable to them."

"That *does* sound like something Father would say. And it could indeed be seen as permission to court me."

I sighed, content to have found a plausible explanation. As tiring as it was to constantly seek out misconceptions, I was glad to know I wasn't being deceived or outright lied to.

"That will do, milady," Cordula said. "You performed excellently today. Let us return to the dormitory now that there are no lingering questions."

Moved by my head attendant's praise, I allowed Kenntrips and Rasantark to escort me to the door leading to the dormitory.

"There are many minute details that cannot be effectively conveyed through letters," I said. "I might be put on the spot again in the future—and with that in mind, it would do me well to know what Father is thinking."

"Much has changed of late. A meeting to bring everyone up to speed will most certainly be necessary—for you and the archducal couple."

And so, as per my request, Cordula secured me permission to

return to Dunkelfelger on Earthday for a meeting with Father.

“Welcome home, Lady Hannelore.”

After eating breakfast and saying farewell to my Royal Academy retainers, I had briskly returned to Dunkelfelger with Cordula. My adult retainers welcomed me upon my arrival, having been waiting on the other end of the teleporter.

“Lady Hannelore, we are to take you straight to the archducal living quarters. The archducal couple is waiting.”

Because it was Earthday, Mother and Father were in their chambers rather than their offices. It was my first time visiting home during the academic term.

“I feel a tad anxious,” I admitted. “One usually returns home early only if one has caused trouble of some kind. I always thought Raufereg would come back before me. It feels entirely as if I have become a problem child.”

My retainers met my words with partial smiles.

“Oh? Have you not felt that way before?”

“Problems are problems, even if not caused maliciously.”

“Have you forgotten that the Goddess of Time descended into your body?”

“We were stunned when Cordula wrote to us, requesting emergency access to Lord Lestilaut’s jureve from before his wedding. We had just been about to close the teleportation hall; Lord Lestilaut and the aub were both in quite the hurry.”

“On the topic of sudden occurrences, what about all those knights who suddenly claimed to have recalled memories of Lord Ferdinand and Lady Rozemyne? Apparently that had something to do with divine influence, but the details are still a mystery to us.”

“The knights were exhilarated to hear of all the ditter challenges Dunkelfelger had received, then complained to no end when they found out only the archducal family and their guard knights were allowed to participate.”

“Those same guard knights have thrown themselves into their training. We are quite ready for battle ourselves.”

A shiver ran down my spine. Their chatter reminded me of the fellowship gathering, when Lord Anastasius had told me not to cause any trouble.

“Um... Am I even more of a problem child than Raufereg?” I asked. The issues he caused went no further than the dormitory and

the castle; mine involved the entire duchy.

“One can hardly pin the blame on you, since the catalyst was the descent of a goddess,” my retainers said, consoling me. “The impact cannot be overstated, however, and your return home was ultimately inevitable.”

We entered the living quarters, passing through a door that only those with prior approval could use. To our right was the hallway to Father’s and Mother’s rooms. To the left was my brother and Eineliebe’s.

“Will my brother and Eineliebe be in attendance?” I asked.

“Lord Lestilaut will, but not Lady Eineliebe. She already had plans, and the abrupt nature of your return meant she had no time to change them.”

Nearly a year had passed since Eineliebe and my brother’s wedding. For the first time, she was participating in winter socializing as a member of the archducal family. Considering how important it was for her to establish a strong support base, she could hardly treat her existing plans lightly.

“Lady Sieglinde, Lady Hannelore has arrived. May she enter?”

Once our retainers had exchanged the usual formalities, I entered. We always used Mother’s room for family meetings and the like. Father’s room contained the door to the foundation and such, so I wasn’t allowed inside.

“Father, Mother, Brother—it is good to see you all,” I said.

“Welcome back, Hannelore.”

“Well met.”

I sat down, and Mother’s attendant set about pouring me some tea. I savored the familiar taste, the sweets made with ingredients not found in the Royal Academy, and the welcoming company.

But no sooner had we cleared the room of retainers so we could speak frankly than my brother glared at me.

“Come on, Hannelore. Out with it. How can you sit there drinking tea when we’ve got a bride-stealing ditter match on the horizon?”

Such prompting was unnecessary. The urgency of our meeting went without saying. Still, I was so accustomed to being the eldest archduke candidate at the Royal Academy and constantly having to be on high alert that I sincerely appreciated being back home, where there were others to share the burden with me.

“Quiet down, Lestilaut,” Mother said. “What good will it do us

if you earn her ire and she refuses to speak further in protest?"

"Yes, indeed," Father added. "Hannelore, I was told you want us all to be on the same page. What do you wish to know?"

I set down my cup and clenched my fists. "My tea party with Drewanchel revealed much that had not been brought to my attention. There are crucial decisions I must make; how am I to ensure my judgment is sound when there is information you are keeping from me?"

"Hmm..." Father folded his arms, the corners of his lips curving in amusement. "There is much I cannot risk including in letters I must entrust to other people, and information that is best shared only when the time is right. There are things you have kept from me as well, are there not? Cordula seems to suspect you have not shared all that you know about the goddess's descent."

"Ngh... Fair enough," I said. "I acknowledge that some information is best kept secret for the time being."

I was in no position to force Father's hand. There was much about the world of the gods and Alexandria's current status that I was reluctant to reveal before I could speak with Lord Ferdinand and Lady Rozemyne.

"I will share what I can, but too much is changing too quickly," Father said. "For now, let us each explain the situation as we see it."

"I suspect you wish to know about the upcoming ditter match and our cooperation with Drewanchel?" Mother asked.

I picked up my teacup and nodded.

"It started with the descent of the goddess, naturally," Father began. "As I understand it, she arrived when you, Lord Wilfried, and Lord Ortwin all went to a gazebo."

"Why were the three of you together in a gazebo in the first place?" my brother interjected. "How did that even happen?"

"We were discussing something in class and decided to take the conversation outside," I said. "I believe they wished to see some kind of flower."

My brother looked doubtful, but I barely remembered the details myself. I had been too busy stressing over whether I would receive the engagement tasks I had so desired.

"At least tell me you didn't brainlessly agree to go because Wilfried invited you."

"One of my retainers wished to form closer bonds with

Ehrenfest, so I met with Lord Wilfried to discuss the matter. Lord Ortwin involved himself for reasons I do not understand. Kenntrips accompanied us, if you do not believe me. I have nothing to hide.”

On the contrary, I had plenty. I did not want my parents to know I had tried and failed to get engagement tasks from Lord Wilfried. Lestilaut stared straight into my eyes as I tried my best not to let anything slip.

“Lestilaut, stop sidetracking us. What matters is what they discussed. As an archnoble in a meeting of archduke candidates, Kenntrips was not granted a sound-blocker, and thus could not hear them.”

That much was true. The goddess had descended into me not long into our conversation—and when I returned, talk of the ditto match had taken precedence. The fact my family had a vague idea of what we had discussed likely meant Lord Ortwin had brought it up when proposing that our duchies work together.

“Lord Ortwin wished to discuss the hardship of our generation striving to be aubs despite our inferior schtappes,” I said.

“I see. And that led to our cooperation...” Father muttered, popping a sweet into his mouth. “It’s impressive to have organized that much in just a few days.”

“Um, Father... Why did you choose to ally with Drewanchel in the first place?”

“It started with the goddess’s descent. Upon hearing the news, Lord Sigiswald sent me a formal proposal. He said we could ‘iron out the details at the Interduchy Tournament,’ meaning he refused to take no for an answer.”

Lord Sigiswald was using this one year when he was still being treated as royalty to the fullest. Even Dunkelfelger the First was unable to simply refuse him.

“We thought we had at least a year to prepare ourselves after the events of the Archduke Conference, when Drewanchel admonished him for seeking a new bride so soon after his divorce,” Mother said. She squeezed her eyes shut and pressed a finger between her eyebrows—a gesture she reserved for when facing an unexpected annoyance. The former prince’s proposal truly must have come as a shock to her.

“I chose suitors for you specifically so that any abrupt proposals would need to be settled through bride-stealing ditto,” Father noted. “We intended to give you time to choose a partner of your

own—and to turn bride-stealing ditter into bride-taking ditter, if you so desired.”

Incidentally, while I was still unconscious, Lord Ortwin had informed them through apprentice scholars that Korinthsdaum was inciting other duchies with rumors that only a former royal was fit to marry a divine avatar.

“And that was when Drewanchel issued their ditter challenge?” I asked.

“Yes,” my brother said, “but only after Father demanded it.”

“Come again?”

I turned to Father, confused, and saw that he was grinning. There was a conniving air about him.

“It was more convenient to have Drewanchel issue a bride-stealing ditter challenge, forcing any other proposals to take the same approach, than for us to refuse an official proposal from a former prince and risk being drawn into ditter anyway.”

“Perhaps, but I would not have expected Drewanchel to go along with it. Was there more at play, or did you know of a weakness to exploit?”

“I wouldn’t go so far as to call it a weakness. I simply told them that if their proposal from spring was genuine, they should issue a challenge themselves.”

“Hold on! What proposal from spring?!”

“Ah, yes. During the Archduke Conference, Drewanchel expressed an interest in your hand.”

My mind went completely blank. As I surveyed the room, I saw that no one else shared my surprise. Mother was simply sipping her tea.

“I did not know that,” I said at last. “Why did nobody tell me?”

“Because we refused them on the spot,” Mother replied. “Lord Anastasius told us what transpired in the more in-depth discussions about Lady Adolphine’s divorce.”

As it turned out, Aub Drewanchel had said that for Lady Adolphine to stay married to Lord Sigiswald, he wanted a royal guarantee that Lord Ortwin would marry either Lady Rozemyne, the divine avatar, or Lady Eglantine, the new Zent.

“What reason had we to take their calls for your hand seriously?” Mother asked. “They had just been refused in requesting a union with the Zent or Lady Rozemyne. Even given the nature of political marriages, it was far too selfish of them.”

I averted my gaze, thinking back to Lord Ortwin's proposal. I could still see the passion in his eyes as he held the courtship magic tool toward me.

"Was Lord Ortwin's proposal politically motivated?" I asked. If I could not take him at his word, then postponing my response had certainly been the right choice.

"I do wonder... We spoke only with the aub at the Archduke Conference, so we know not how Lord Ortwin truly feels. It should be noted that politics are a natural part of any noble marriage, though the boy's ditter challenge tells me he is driven by something more. What do you think, Lestilaut?"

Mother turned to him. After all, he had resorted to bride-stealing ditter when fighting for Lady Rozemyne's hand.

Lestilaut grumbled and shot me a glare before nudging the conversation back on track. "Upon hearing Father's answer, Drewanchel issued both its challenge to bride-stealing ditter and a request for our cooperation. Father praised their preparation."

"Is Aub Drewanchel truly that invested in a relationship with Dunkelfelger?" I asked. He did not strike me as someone who enjoyed ditter, yet he would need to play an active role in the upcoming match.

"Because of the recent divorce, Drewanchel is receiving reparations from Korinthsdaum," Mother said. "Lady Adolphine is being treated well—but as more time passes, her separation could come to be a blemish on her reputation. Lord Sigiswald is well-versed in the art of manipulating the public, after all."

"Furthermore," my brother continued, "though Drewanchel has a position of strength over Lord Sigiswald, it should last only a year or two at most. Once the reparations have been paid, Korinthsdaum will surely strike back. Given the uncertainty about how long the former royal family's influence will endure, it is only natural that Drewanchel would seek to ally with us."

Lady Adolphine's position was far more unstable than I had thought. And if even Mother had called the former prince "well-versed" in manipulation, then it had to be true.

"Drewanchel wishes to use the next year or two, while it still has the upper hand, to shave down Lord Sigiswald's influence as much as possible," Father said. "Whether you marry into Drewanchel or not, our cooperation in this match will both strengthen our relationship and weaken Korinthsdaum."

“That is what Lord Ortwin said, more or less, though it feels different somehow,” I mused aloud. “Was there any truth to what Kenntrips told me—that, far from giving permission for Lord Ortwin to court me, you merely taunted Drewanchel on the matter?”

“Heh... Yes, that is true. Drewanchel is interpreting my words to their needs.”

Apparently, Father had said, *“Going from bride-stealing to bride-taking ditter is no easy matter. I doubt Hannelore will change her mind when she already has suitors, and her heart remains with the Ehrenfest archduke candidate. Just try to win her over if you can.”*

“It is difficult to wholly dismiss Drewanchel’s interpretation, but even if I did indirectly encourage Lord Ortwin to attempt courting you, I never said I would unilaterally acknowledge him as one of your suitors. That would be overstepping.”

“Drewanchel is adept at treading such lines—perhaps because they’re so inclined toward scholarship...” Mother said. “It is not a fault.”

Yet I could not bring myself to like it. I was not particularly skilled at conversations where one had to read between the lines of statements only ever implied to begin with.

“I see now how matters escalated into bride-stealing ditter and how Dunkelfelger ended up cooperating with Drewanchel,” I said—yet I could not act properly without understanding my aub’s intentions. “In the end, Father, what is it you wish for me to do? Though it required rather broad interpretation, you did permit Lord Ortwin to court me despite having already chosen my suitors.”

Father turned to Mother, stroking his chin. “Sieglinde told me to give you a choice.”

“She did?”

I turned to her as well. She looked up in thought, then said, “To begin with, we raised you to be married into another duchy, no? When the civil war began, Dunkelfelger chose a position of neutrality due to the royal family losing the Grutrissheit. The aub at the time decreed your father would have to marry within the duchy to keep us from being drawn into the war ourselves.”

I understood that much. The aub’s decree had led to Mother being taken as a first wife, rather than a second wife as planned, which in turn set my brother up to be the next archduke.

“With both his parents from Dunkelfelger, Lestilaut would have been an archduke with few ties to other duchies. And in a

Yurgenschmidt without a Grutrissheit, such cooperation would have been essential for us to manage Old Werkestock. Thus, his retainers were chosen from archducal branch families with a parent from another duchy, and you were raised to wed into another top-ranking duchy to support him.”

Kenntrips and Rasantark had been chosen as my brother’s retainers because their mothers hailed from outside Dunkelfelger. Because I had been raised to wed into another duchy, few of my retainers were from branch families.

“However,” Mother continued, “a Zent arose with the Grutrissheit, borders were redrawn, and we have found ourselves the top-ranked duchy. Old Werkestock has been absorbed into Dunkelfelger, and we can even open our country gate.”

“We have less reason to care about connections to other duchies,” Father added. “Now, we are focused on restructuring ourselves and establishing trade with other countries.”

There was a broad grin on the aub’s face. He had been the first to cheer and the loudest to celebrate when Lady Rozemyne first made our country gate shine.

I see now that Dunkelfelger has reason to keep me here beyond the simple fact that I am a friend of the divine avatar.

If they intended to focus on restructuring the duchy, then my brother would find life much easier with a full-blooded sister by his side. Lungtase, our half-sister, would suffice for a political marriage to another duchy, but she would not be useful for providing internal support. Father’s second wife was from another faction, and it was doubtful her daughter could build a cooperative relationship with Eineliebe.

“Still, Dunkelfelger would gain much from you being married into Drewanchel. Or into Ehrenfest, of course.”

“I did not think they were included in the choices you offered me,” I said. Our nobles were still furious with Ehrenfest for going back on their ditler contract and refusing my hand, and Drewanchel had challenged us to bride-stealing ditler. Neither option felt remotely stable.

“You have a stubborn side to you, Hannelore,” Father said. “Once you make up your mind on something, you dig your heels in and refuse to change it.”

Coming from someone obsessed with ditler!

Despite my internal protest, I remembered Kenntrips saying

something similar. And he wasn't the only one who agreed.

"It takes you an eternity to decide," Mother said, "but once you do, you never budge."

"Don't deny it—that side of you is exactly like Father," Lestilaut teased.

"Hey now," Father interjected. "I don't waver the way Hannelore does."

Are we really that similar? I certainly hope not..

As I furrowed my brow, Father gave a faint smile. "No need to grimace like that. You even blew up at Sieglinde over Ehrenfest, did you not? In part, what happened stemmed from your own choices, but we can just as easily say you were a victim of Lestilaut going rogue. As your father, I wanted to see you face Ehrenfest a second time, secure what you desired, and build a relationship with Lord Wilfried."

It *had* been my decision both to take Lord Wilfried's hand during the match and to relinquish the engagement at Ehrenfest's request. Neither reflected well on me in the eyes of the nobility, and I had made my choices fully aware of the harsh looks they would earn me. Yet, despite acting against my duchy's interests, I had escaped punishment and continued to live as an archduke candidate.

All along, my parents had been watching over me. That I only realized it now spoke to how narrow my view of the world had been.

"Still, with circumstances changing so dramatically, I could not merely sit back and watch forever," Father said. "You remain an archduke candidate of Dunkelfelger."

"At the very least, we intended to wait two years for you to act," Mother noted. "That much held from the ditter match until now."

I smiled. No doubt they still thought of me as their daughter obsessed with Ehrenfest and Lord Wilfried.

"I have already moved past my feelings for Lord Wilfried," I said.

"Or you've only convinced yourself of that and still harbor some lingering affection," my brother retorted, eyeing me skeptically.

I pursed my lips and looked away. "Quiet, Brother. How can you criticize me when you continue to paint Lady Rozemyne and Lady Eglantine even now that you are married? I am... certain of

my resolve. Much happened before and after I was invited to the world of the gods.”

I spoke vaguely, unsure how much they knew. Though I had asked Kenntrips to keep things secret, some portion still might have reached them—that I had tried and failed to obtain engagement tasks, that I had gone a year into the past, that I had learned so much there... All of it flashed through my mind.

“If Lord Wilfried had wanted it, I might have pursued him. But I could not touch—much less undo—Ehrenfest’s tangled threads.”

“I heard you’d changed a lot after the goddess’s descent, but this is something else...” my brother said, blithely ignoring my request that he stay silent.

Father cleared his throat and straightened, his wry half-smile fading as he adopted the stern look of an aub. I straightened my back as well and met his gaze.

“Choose, then,” he said. “Will you wed Lord Sigiswald, the former royal? Will you accept Lord Ortwin’s proposal and go to Drewanchel? Or will you accept one of your suitors and remain in Dunkelfelger? If you do not decide now, I will decide for you as your aub. And you will obey.”

Ehrenfest was pointedly absent from the options. The intensity in Father’s red eyes left no room for wavering or excuses. I took a sip of my now lukewarm tea to soothe my dry throat, then looked up at him with a smile. I could only hope I was managing the calm, composed expression expected of a member of the archducal family.



“The goddess’s descent means other duchies will expect me to play the role not of a Dunkelfelger archduke candidate but of the second divine avatar. Yet my body was used only to summon Lady Rozemyne. I cannot be expected to inherit the Grutrisheit, negotiate with the gods, or answer their calls as she does.”

It was possible that Lord Ortwin himself would place no such expectations on me, but there was no way to prevent the rest of Drewanchel from harboring unreasonable hopes. As someone raised in an archducal family, I knew all too well how nobles treated those who failed to meet the expectations imposed on them.

“I am well aware of my own limits, and I have no wish to bear the burden of another duchy treating me as a divine avatar,” I continued. “I would like to remain in Dunkelfelger and support my brother in his duties as aub.”

Political maneuvering was unavoidable in noble marriages. Marrying into another duchy now, branded as a divine avatar, would bring me nothing but trouble.

“If that’s your choice, Hannelore, then Dunkelfelger will stand as one to protect you as our treasure,” Father assured me. “That said... do you have the resolve to vow that you won’t aid our enemies? You won’t be forgiven a second time for betraying the loyalty of your knights.”

I gave a small smile. “If I had any desire at all to wed into Drewanchel, I would have attended their tea party to speak with Lord Ortwin, and I would have spent more time conversing with him in the classroom where no one could interrupt us. After everything that has happened, I have no wish to go to another duchy. You may trust me. Mother, Lestilaut—that goes for you as well,” I added, glancing at them in turn.

All three nodded.

“Very well. You have my trust,” my brother said. “The question remains, though—which suitor will you pick? Have you decided?”

I faltered. My choice to stay in Dunkelfelger had been made for me long before this conversation. The title of divine avatar made it impossible to marry into another duchy whether I wished it or not. It wasn’t as though I had decided on a suitor already.

“As for that... I have not yet chosen,” I admitted.

“I see. Either will do,” my brother said casually. “Kenntrips is

used to consoling you after the sobbing fits you used to have whenever I offended you, and Rasantark spent far too long helping you devise ‘ultimate moves’ to defeat me in battle. Neither of them would ever expect you to act the part of a divine avatar.”

“Eek! Aah! B-Brother!” I exclaimed, my mind going blank in an instant. “It is *indescribably* rude to dredge up such tales from before one’s baptism! Did *you* not wave around a common stick and insist it was a schtappe?! All I did as a child was mimic you!”

Mother clapped her hands, cutting through our escalating embarrassment. “Enough. It is unsightly. If you are so eager to wallow in nostalgia, I shall read aloud from your head attendants’ diaries.”

We froze and apologized on the spot. There was no defeating her.

Father had watched our squabble with a smile, but he quickly wiped it away and struck the table with one finger. “With that established—Hannelore, I order you to unify the dormitory in preparation for bride-stealing ditter against our foes.”

“I intended to take steps toward that regardless, but what degree of unity are you expecting?” I asked.

If he wished me to destroy Raufereg, then my efforts at educating him would hardly suffice. Carrying out my father’s command would not be difficult—but without clear parameters, I risked going too far.

“You may hold a mock battle in the Royal Academy,” he said. “Center it around Rasantark and Raufereg. If Rasantark wins, Raufereg will be demoted to an archnoble.”

“That will have a dramatic impact on the second wife’s faction, considering he was baptized as a member of the archducal family,” I said. “Will that be a problem?”

I had barely spoken to Raufereg, so I considered him a nuisance more than anything else. But to Father, he was still a son. Surely that meant Father would feel some obligation to protect him.

“If he had even a shred of resolve to bear the consequences of his actions, any awareness of his duty to bring honor and prosperity to Dunkelfelger, or even the faintest hint of an opinion beyond ditter, I could have shown him some leniency. But that boy possesses nothing except lust for the battlefield,” Father said with an irritated sigh. “He thinks nothing of what a bride-stealing ditter challenge entails, and he does not understand the meaning of taking

your hand. I cannot allow such a fool to remain among Dunkelfelger's archducal family. Stripping him of that status and demoting him is no harsher than when Tarkus was placed beneath Verfuhereer despite being born and raised under Flutrane's might."

Father's words were blunt—harsh, even—but beneath them lay a parent's decision about where his son would be best suited. If Raufereg could thrive as an archknight, then letting him remain an archduke candidate would only harm him and the duchy both.

I will need no restraint, then.

"Understood," I said. "I will unify the dormitory together with Rasantark."

Father nodded gravely.

Ditter at the Dormitory

“Welcome back, Lady Hannelore.”

“Forgive my urgency, but am I safe to go to the common room?”

I had sent a letter to the dormitory as soon as our family discussion ended, instructing that all archduke candidates and their retainers gather there by fifth bell for an announcement. Anyone else who wished to attend was welcome to join us. I had then taken lunch with my family, returning to the Academy moments before the meeting was due to be held.

“Everyone has gathered already, including the retainers. There are quite a number of students.”

“Good.”

“Lady Hannelore, would it not have been best to meet with Lord Lestilaut’s and Lady Eineliebe’s retainers first, in a separate room?”

I would have preferred that too, but my hands were tied. With a sigh, I confessed, “There is simply not enough time to do that *and* hold a ditter match after dinner.”

“Um... After dinner? Today?”

I was equally surprised.

From what Father and Mother had been told, Raufereg had been speaking with Korinthsdaum students more and more during class. Mother had therefore ordered me to settle everything on Earthday—our day off—in full view of the rest of the dormitory, both to deal with all the nobles he had dragged into his nonsense and to prevent other duchies from manipulating him further, which by now was practically unavoidable.

“Furthermore, Father has instructed me to reveal this to both Raufereg’s and Rasantark’s groups at the same time,” I added. If the two factions did not receive exactly the same amount of time to prepare, Raufereg’s side might later use it as reasoning for his punishment to be reduced.

In short, I must resolve everything in a single day! Why are both my

parents so unreasonable?!

“Your return was a little delayed for something so urgent,” Elusia said with a strained smile. “Did something unexpected happen?”

I hung my head and nodded. Poor timing had tormented me since birth, meaning things rarely went according to plan. I had intended to return much earlier.

“I was surrounded by knights begging to join my retinue,” I explained. “It seems they are desperate to participate in the bride-stealing ditter match.”

“We expected something of the sort, but their numbers and persistence exceeded even our predictions,” Cordula added, clearly annoyed.

I shared her sentiment completely. She said we had “expected” it, but I had never imagined knight after knight would stop me, blocking any hope of returning to the dormitory swiftly.

“I believe their motivation extends beyond the ditter match.” Heilliese giggled, beginning to walk toward the common room. “Not only did you clear your name with true ditter, but you have also come to be known as the second divine avatar.”

Luitpold nodded in agreement. “There is no helping it. You have relatively few retainers because you were intended to wed outside the duchy, and most of those you *do* have are young. Older nobles naturally see this as their chance.”

As my retainers suggested, recent changes in circumstance had surely contributed—but the fact remained that all those knights had approached *me* specifically in the brief window before my return to the Royal Academy. The ditter match was undeniably their primary motivator.

“Perhaps you *should* take on two or three more guard knights for the match. You have so few adult knights that you had to borrow some of Lord Lestilaut’s for true ditter...”

Indeed, a bride marrying into another duchy could hardly bring all her retainers with her. Most of mine were girls my age who would have married around the same time, and the remainder would have gone to Eineliebe after my departure. That was fine for the Royal Academy, but it had left me with far from the ideal manpower for true ditter.

“It might be difficult to decide immediately, but if you intend to remain in Dunkelfelger, you will need more retainers regardless.”

“And if you *are* going to take them, you should do so before the bride-stealing match. It will strengthen our forces—and with so many applicants, you may freely choose from our mightiest.”

It hurt a little that serving me seemed to be only a bonus to them, but the reasoning was sound. The pool of applicants would certainly change after the match.

“Perhaps you should consult Lady Eineliebe. She had intended to inherit many of your retainers.”

“We spoke about that briefly at lunch,” I replied. “It seems I may keep everyone. She said she can simply take on new retainers recommended by my brother and mother.”

Fifth bell rang as we walked, and we hurried into the common room.

“Thank you all for gathering,” I said. “I apologize for summoning you on an Earthday.”

I swept my gaze across the room. Professor Rauffen sat at the very back, then Raufereg and his retainers, then my brother’s, Eineliebe’s, Lungtase’s... A table-by-table glance confirmed that all archducal retainers were present. The general turnout was greater than I expected as well. Some were sharp-eyed students who understood the significance of an announcement from an archduke candidate freshly returned from the duchy. Others hovered around Raufereg, glaring at my suitors.

“This way, Lady Hannelore.”

I walked through the strained air and took my seat at the farthest table. All my retainers sat except Cordula and Heilliese.

“I have just returned from Dunkelfelger,” I announced. “I will report what Aub Dunkelfelger and I discussed and decided.”

The atmosphere turned sharp as I continued, explaining the suspicions I had formed through speaking to Lord Ortwin, the misunderstandings that had arisen, and the events that had unfolded in the duchy since the goddess’s descent into me.

“I speak now the words of my father. ‘We must not face other duchies in bride-stealing ditter while divided. Go forth and unify the dormitory.’”

Several students inhaled sharply and glanced at Raufereg. They understood my father’s intention—that he wished for me to put an end to Raufereg’s chaos.

“My father believes Dunkelfelger needs only one representative for bride-stealing ditter,” I continued. “To that end, Raufereg and

Rasantark will hold an in-dormitory ditter match after dinner today.”

Raufereg cheered like a small child, earning only strained, conflicted looks. Even his own faction had fallen silent in shock. He did not notice the horror and sympathy on every other face.

“This match will serve as a prelude to the upcoming bride-stealing ditter. We cannot split our strength between multiple representatives. My father has judged that one who cannot resolve conflict *within* the duchy cannot be entrusted with representing us in a match involving adult knights of other duchies.”

As a stir ran through the common room, one student raised a hand.

“Lady Hannelore!”

“Yes?”

“Did the aub say what will happen to the loser?”

“Of course. If Raufereg loses”—the silence became so absolute that I could hear every breath—“he will be stripped of his archduke candidacy and reduced to archnobility. His retainers will be relieved of duty.”

“What?!”

“That’s too much!”

Raufereg’s group wilted with despair. Clearly, they had not expected anything of this severity.

“Raufereg’s conduct has deeply angered the aub. He declared his entry into the bride-stealing match without consulting anyone or laying the proper groundwork. His behavior is entirely unbecoming of an archduke candidate. Lady Reichlene has already agreed to the punishment.”

That should have made it perfectly clear to his retainers: Raufereg was being demoted for defying the aub and sowing disorder. I saw no reason to pity him; I believed he would fare far better devoting himself to the knight course as an archnoble than misusing the authority of an archduke candidate. While his retainers must have been panicking at how this could alter their futures and status, removing him before other duchies could exploit him was essential.

“And what if I win?!” Raufereg shouted, eyes narrowed. “Rasantark should face equal punishment, no?! It’d be unfair otherwise!”

“But of course,” I said with a nod. Concerned gazes immediately

fell on my chosen suitors. “If Rasantark loses, he and Kenntrips will be deemed unfit to marry me and will be relieved of their duties as retainers.”

“The first part makes sense, but why would they be relieved of duty...?”

“Simply for losing a ditter match...?”

Murmurs rippled through the students, but the retainers all seemed to understand. My brother and I had faced consequences for losing our ditter match; it made sense that losing the prelude to bride-stealing ditter would carry a heavy cost as well.

“One side will lose his archduke candidacy, while the other will be relieved of their retainership. Both are lifelong stains on one’s reputation,” I said. “You cannot call that unfair, Raufereg. And in any case, you need only win.”

“Yeah! And that’s what I’ll do!” Raufereg bellowed.

His retainers looked up with fierce determination, bearing the intensity unique to those driven into an inescapable corner. Victory was their only path forward.

“Kenntrips, Rasantark,” I said, “my brother had but one message for you: ‘I have no need of retainers pathetic enough to lose to a first-year, archduke candidate or not.’”

“We will not lose,” Kenntrips assured me. “You can count on that.”

“Until now, I’ve held back out of respect for his status,” Rasantark added. “At last, I can fight freely.”

They nodded, unruffled. Accepting dismissal if they lost was only natural. No doubt they had predicted exactly what my brother would say.

“In that case—step forward, Rasantark, Raufereg. You will sign this.”

I summoned them both and held out a board prepared by my apprentice scholars. It listed the conditions and date of the match. Once they had read it and signed their names, I lifted it high for all to see.

“Ditter will be held under these conditions after dinner,” I announced. “Both sides must recruit their members and submit a list of names by fifth-and-a-half bell.”

“Let’s go, everyone! Time for a strategy meeting!” Raufereg shouted, tearing out of the common room with his retainers scrambling after him. As they disappeared, Rasantark turned back

to me.

“Lady Hannelore, will you be participating?”

“No. It would be unseemly for me and my retainers to take part in a match between my suitors. I will simply arbitrate.”

His shoulders sank in disappointment. Sadly, there was nothing to be done.

I would much rather fight than oversee logistics...

All I could do now was control team sizes and submit budget requests—tasks I would have gladly handed to someone else. Being a woman of the archducal family meant endlessly suppressing the rampages of our men and handling the administrative drudgery behind their battles.

I truly believe the men should be responsible for the tedious administrative work that goes into their ditler matches!

Mother had likely ordered me to oversee the ditler because, if I was to remain in Dunkelfelger, this sort of task would become routine. It was her way of making me show my resolve to stay—and perhaps a subtle reprimand for my failure to keep Raufereg in line.

“My retainers will prepare the training grounds and submit the budget reports, among other matters,” I said. “I will remain here. Direct all ditler-related reports to this room.”

“Understood.”

I was staying in the common room because students were bound to have questions—about participation, rules, or any number of trivial matters.

“Lady Hannelore, we have gathered the volunteers,” Rasantark and Vestaert reported, boards in hand.

Vestaert was one of my brother’s guard knights. He was a sixth-year, one year older than Rasantark, and the sort of dependable upperclassman who naturally seemed to look after those around him. He was likely supporting Rasantark as a fellow retainer.

I scanned the list of those wishing to participate in tonight’s ditler. Rasantark’s side had far more volunteers than Raufereg’s.

“I worried that more people were listening to Raufereg after the goddess’s descent,” I said. “It’s a relief to see most still understand the truth of the situation.”

“Such is the significance of an archducal family member’s permission,” Rasantark replied. “While you were unconscious, it was easier for Lord Raufereg’s words to carry weight.”

I nodded curtly.

“Consult his list of participants and match your numbers to his. Ideally, all of Lestilaut’s and Eineliebe’s knights will participate as well, since bride-stealing ditler is restricted to archducal families and their guard knights.”

“Understood,” Vestaert said. Then he hesitated, steeling himself. “Forgive the rudeness of this question, but... may I confirm one thing? Some knights fear you might betray the duchy again and side with our opponents. Is it truly your own will to remain in Dunkelfelger, Lady Hannelore?”

I sensed a pulse of anger and displeasure from my retainers. They were furious at the disrespect, but also afraid. I had betrayed them once already.

“My father asked me the same question,” I said, “so I will give you the same answer. Because of the goddess’s descent, other duchies will expect me to act not as a Dunkelfelger archduke candidate, but as the second divine avatar. I cannot aid the gods or grant the Grutrissheit as Lady Rozemyne can. I do not want such expectations placed upon me, so I will not marry into another duchy.”

“It is a relief to hear it from you directly.”

Rasantark clapped Vestaert on the back. “See? I told you. Kenntrips just can’t help being paranoid. A clear answer like that should put the other knights at ease too.”

I slumped my shoulders a little. “Kenntrips said to my face that he couldn’t trust me, but... it seems the two of you take my answer honestly.”

“You’ve cleared your name in true ditler and chosen to remain in Dunkelfelger. We can trust you’ll never betray us again,” Rasantark said. The conviction in his voice warmed me more than I expected. “Still, it’s a shame we won’t have the chance to fight together.”

“That isn’t the first time you’ve said that. Do you truly wish to fight alongside me that badly?” I asked, suddenly wondering if this was some kind of obsession.

“Yes!” Rasantark declared, his chestnut eyes shining. “I want to protect you with all my strength as a knight—and with all my might as a suitor seeking your hand.”

“S-Seeking my hand...?”

“I’m serious,” he said plainly, looking me straight in the eye.

"I've always thought you're at your most beautiful when you're fighting."

Instinctively, I glanced around us. "Um... Where is *this* coming from?"

"I was told my feelings hadn't reached you, and that I should repeat them over and over until they do. And since we've had no opportunity to speak in private... Well..."

I remembered turning down his invitation to the gazebos. As good as my reasons had been, he had a point.

The instant I hesitated, Vestaert smoothly stepped in and pressed a pair of sound-blockers into Rasantark's hand. "If you can't get her away from her retainers, use these," he said.

Rasantark nodded, determined, and held one out to me. "Lady Hannelore—if you would do me the honor!"

"Right here? Right now?!"

"I fear you'll only get busier from here on."

Even once tonight's ditter was settled, I would be buried in work. I would need to handle Raufereg's demotion, deal with his retainers, and manage interduchy relations—all things only an archduke candidate could do. And with the inevitable meetings with the Zent that would follow such a high-profile match, what little free time I had left would disappear entirely.

"Cordula..."

"You won't have much time, but I see no issue with speaking while you can," my head attendant said. With her permission, I accepted the magic tool.

"Vestaert told me I'm terrible at courting, that none of my feelings have reached you, and that I should start using my brain outside of training," Rasantark began. "So I want to start by making myself clear."

H-How am I supposed to react to this?

Rasantark wore the expression of a heroic knight as he spoke, but I already knew he harbored feelings for me. I had noticed them recently, and I understood he admired my battle tendencies because of what he had said to Lord Ortwin. Admitting it aloud felt far too embarrassing... but how else would we clear the air?

"I am aware of your, um... affection."

"Maybe you are, but that's not it..." Rasantark muttered, deflating. He grabbed his head, obviously trying to recall whatever advice Vestaert had drilled into him. I suspected Vestaert had given

him pointers in the same way he had provided the sound-blockers.

I waited, my heart racing as I wondered what Rasantark might say next. Then, quite suddenly, he straightened and declared with startling volume:

“It was during training!”

“H-Hmm...? What was?” I asked, unable to grasp his meaning. Rasantark looked equally confused.

“What was what?”

We stared at each other for what felt like an eternity before I realized I would have to take charge.

“Rasantark, what exactly did Vestaert tell you?”

“Umm... He told me it wasn’t clear when I fell for you, and what parts of you made me feel that way.”

“That much is true.”

“So I thought I should start from there. Please listen!”

“O-Okay...”

His chestnut eyes were deadly serious, and his hands trembled as he clutched the sound-blocker. Whatever hint of romance had once been there had collapsed into pure intensity, and my heart raced not from excitement but from anxiety as I tried to glean even the simplest meaning behind what he was attempting to say.

Rasantark, please... Try a little harder!

It felt unbecoming to think so, yet I was sure Vestaert had gone through this same torment himself. The sound-blocker should have meant no one could hear us, but for some reason, it felt like everyone nearby was watching us with tired, sympathetic eyes.

Rasantark took a deep breath... then continued.

Feelings and Ditter

“The first time I recognized your beauty was the first day we trained together.”

The event Rasantark referred to was a gathering of the archducal family held roughly once a season. It was intended to give the archduke’s children a chance to socialize without having to leave the castle, and as long as one had parental permission, one didn’t even need to be baptized to attend.

“Um, were you not four then?” I asked. I remembered looking forward to his joining us, since he was Kenntrips’s half-brother and about my age.

He’s felt this way all these years? Truly?

Rasantark must have seen that I was lost for words, because he quickly elaborated. “I was four when I first attended one of those gatherings, but it wasn’t until a year later that we trained together. Furthermore, I... I do not mean to say I was conscious of you as a girl then, or that I fell for you at first sight. I simply thought you were beautiful.”

“When I was five...?” I might have been called cute at that age, but I hardly thought I was beautiful. “That was when Kenntrips called me Lady Crybaby, was it not?”

Rasantark nodded, his lips curving slightly. “That takes me back. Before we trained together, I was so used to you being in tears that I considered it the perfect nickname. You cried when Lord Lestilaut raced to the north garden. You sobbed to Kenntrips whenever your brother was mean to you...”

“Ngh...” I glared at him in embarrassment. “Please purge those thoughts from your memory.”

“No,” he said, refusing me outright. “You cried so much that I wondered how you’d train at all. And, now that I think about it, you cried whenever it didn’t go well.”

Back then, my brother had seemed able to master the basics of any weapon he picked up. I had tried so hard to keep up with him and wept in frustration when my efforts fell short. It wasn’t a

pleasant memory, by any means.

“I mean it!” I exclaimed. “Forget all this at once!”

“I could never—for that was when you became so special to me, Lady Hannelore.”

“But... you just said that I cried all the time, even during training. It was nothing but shameful.”

“Yet you never gave up. No matter how impossible the road ahead of you seemed, you kept your chin up and forged on. The very sight enraptured me.”

“Bweh?!”

In my surprise, I made such a mortifying noise that I clapped a hand over my mouth in embarrassment. Rasantark must not have heard me; he squeezed his sound-blocker as he continued.

“When you finally succeeded, to your instructor’s praise, the pride you emanated had me smitten. You couldn’t have been further from the Lady Crybaby I had come to know.”

It seemed to me that Rasantark was romanticizing one of the lowest, most pathetic moments of my life. How anyone could see the good in such a wretched memory was beyond me.

“And your fighting style...” he continued. “I couldn’t look away. The ingenuity of the moves you adopted to compensate for your small stature, and the intensity of your gaze as you faced down your foes—my own instructor admonished me for being so enamored.”

“I... I see...”

What else can I say?! Someone—anyone—help me!

I turned to Cordula, but she merely smirked. Vestaert wore a similar grin as he watched us. They couldn’t hear my conversation with Rasantark, but they must have guessed what was being said.

As I searched desperately for a response, my cheeks on the cusp of turning crimson, the apprentice knight suddenly dropped to his knees.

“Rasantark?!” I cried, leaning forward on instinct.

I merely stared at the top of his bright orange head peeking over the table. He had his face in his hands and practically squalled, “My mind’s gone blank! I’ve never been so embarrassed in my life!”

The tension between us vanished in an instant, and I couldn’t help but laugh. “I was embarrassed just hearing it. Still... It was cute.” He must have pushed himself as hard as he could to give that confession.

Rasantark lowered his hands just enough to look at me. “Well...

That's something," he said, eyes creased in a gentle smile.



We laughed together until, out of seemingly nowhere, Rasantark rose to his feet and thrust a finger at me. “Lady Hannelore, allow me to embarrass myself once more. Do you recall when Lord Lestilaut deflected all your attacks, then dared you to land even a single hit?”

“I do, but only because my family refuses to let me forget,” I said. “Time and again, they regale each other with the tale of how I wept for more chances, despite being well and truly outmatched.”

In hindsight, I understood how foolish it had been to think I could defeat someone three years my senior. As a child, however, I had convinced myself that anything my brother could do, I could do just as well.

“And do you remember that I invited you to train with me, since I couldn’t touch him either?”

“I do...”

For better or worse, my brother had dug up that ancient history that very morning. My “Anti-Lestilaut Alliance” with Rasantark remained fresh in my mind.

“When I extended the invite, you lit up with all the beauty of a blossoming flower and shouted, ‘Let us win together!’”

Determined to defeat my brother, Rasantark and I had devised all manner of team attacks and “ultimate moves” that might breach his defenses. Looking back on it, we had merely mimicked the same techniques Lestilaut had shown us.

“I remember we asked Kenntrips to help us name our moves, but he refused, for he had already been taken as Lord Lestilaut’s retainer,” Rasantark said. “That really lit a fire under me. I’d also been accepted to serve him, which made me want to prove my mettle even more.”

“I feared we might run out of time when Mother told me my education was soon to begin in earnest, and we would no longer be able to play in the garden together.”

As my baptism drew near and my education properly started, I would spend the gatherings interacting with other women. Far from running around the garden with the boys, I would need to sit at my mother’s side, drinking tea and practicing my embroidery.

“We were so pressed for time that I consulted my instructors on what we could do to defeat someone so much better than us,”

Rasantark continued. "They said we should spend our time perfecting our joint attacks, not simply naming them."

"Did they really?"

"That experience with you opened my eyes to the enjoyment of working with others—devising attacks, reassessing them, taking on challenges, and fighting side by side with trusted allies. If anyone, you taught me all the most important aspects of being a knight."

To me, it had always been a fun little game we had played. To Rasantark, however, it was the very foundation of his career as a knight. It amazed me how differently two people could perceive the same event.

"I still remember our battle plan," Rasantark said. "I would open with a feint, giving you a chance to flank him. Lord Lestilaut would see through it and attack you, but I would intercept, creating an opportunity for you to close in. The number of times he knocked us off our feet..."

"My brother really was immature, wasn't he?" I mused. "He could have held back a little more, considering we were three years his junior."

Rasantark chuckled. "Maybe, but"—he looked at me—"your ear-to-ear grin when we finally landed that blow on him made it all worthwhile. It was then that I knew I had fallen for you."

The knight's beaming smile left no room to doubt how much he treasured the memory. It was strange; his version of events stood in such great contrast from my own.

"Was I really smiling?" I asked. "I remember weeping that we had landed only a single attack, and that Lestilaut had been so vicious about it."

No sooner had we succeeded than he had rounded on us, berating our lack of talent and insisting he had only let us reach him out of mercy. He had clung to that stance, even as I cried my eyes out. Kenntrips had tried to mediate at first but was forced to step in when Lestilaut went too far.

I could still recall the immense power behind my brother's attacks as he had made it unmistakably clear he was "going easy" on us.

The realization that I would never defeat my brother, no matter how painfully hard I tried, had crushed me. He had snapped at me never to defy him again, and I had feared him ever since. How that had been the day Rasantark fell in love with me, I had no idea.

"Your smile was so resplendent that it burned into my mind," Rasantark went on. "I fully intended to challenge Lord Lestilaut again, but we never got another attempt."

"Indeed. My education started in earnest..."

Soon after the battle, I had pivoted into learning to socialize. Even if my mother hadn't insisted upon it, Lestilaut had crushed my hopes too thoroughly for me to have even considered a rematch.

"I worried your focus on studying would make you weak," Rasantark said. "I told Mother you needed time to go outside and move around, then was stunned to hear that most women of other duchies don't exercise at all. I'd assumed all women were as active as Lady Magdalena."

Instead of marrying into another duchy and moving into its castle as an archduke candidate, Lady Magdalena had married the king and received her very own villa as his third wife. She had the freedom to keep following Dunkelfelger's customs, be it sparring with all the knights she had taken with her to the villa or participating in her retainers' morning training.

As I understood it, Lady Magdalena had married into the royal family when the civil war was still being fought, meaning her villa might have been attacked at any moment. No one could have criticized her for training at a time when martial prowess was of such crucial importance.

"Mother told me Lady Magdalena was an exception, as not even a Dunkelfelger archduke candidate would get to take part in training sessions after marrying into another duchy." Rasantark shook his head. "I was overcome with sorrow that the beauty I was so taken with would eventually fade."

"You've taken a particular interest in my fighting, I see..."

Hearing the awe creep into my voice, Rasantark raised a critical eyebrow at me. "Have I not said that countless times already?"

"You have, but suitors are expected to say such things. Even the knights thrilled about true ditto sang the same tune. I never thought your feelings would go back that far—to before we were old enough to even play ditto."

"Hold on! I couldn't have courted you *before* becoming a suitor, could I?! I received more warnings than I could count not to try anything with you, since you were marrying into another duchy!"

Certainly, it would have been a major problem if one of my brother's retainers had tried to court me when I was expected to

marry into another duchy. But timing was far from his only issue.

“Your phrasing was rather poor as well,” I said. “You should profusely thank Vestaert for insisting you speak plainly with me.”

We both glanced at Vestaert; then Rasantark turned to me quizzically. “Does that mean you have a firmer grasp on my feelings for you?” he asked.

I took in a sharp breath. It was too embarrassing a question to have so suddenly forced on me. Though part of me wished desperately to sprint from the room, I steadied my nerves and searched for a response.

Rasantark must have taken my silence for affirmation, because the corners of his lips curved in a smile. “I have witnessed sides of you the people you see only at tea parties or in class will never know, and I refuse to let your beauty be denied by those who know nothing of your devotion to your training. To me, you are the best archduke candidate Dunkelfelger could ask for.”

“Truly...?”

My family thought otherwise. They never missed a chance to tell me I was too timid, weak, and concerned about others for a young woman of my status. Again and again, they told me to be bold, but what did that actually mean? I always felt I was a sorry excuse for an archduke candidate.

“Of course,” Rasantark assured me. “You have been active from a young age, and you stunned the knights into silence with your sheer wealth of mana. Your role in true ditler brought that side of you out even more—perhaps because you could demonstrate your special talent.”

“My... special talent?” I repeated, so unsure what he meant that I could only await an explanation.

Rasantark blinked at my confusion. “Do you really not know what I mean? Lady Hannelore—when you joined the fight, you enjoyed devising the shortest and most certain path to victory, did you not? You formulated strategies and considered which methods of battle would give us the better edge. And, above all else, when your achievements were recognized, did you not dive into your training with renewed vigor?”

Everything he said was true. I had joined Lady Rozemyne in true ditler both to help her and to reclaim my honor. Instructing the knights had not only given me the satisfaction of having fulfilled my duties as an archduke candidate, but had also made me aware

of many mistakes I now knew never to repeat.

“You are a truly capable archduke candidate who shines brightest on the battlefield,” Rasantark continued. “That will never change, no matter how much your reputation as Lady Rozemyne’s close friend and the second divine avatar grows.”

In the face of Rasantark’s praise, the insecurity that had taken root inside me and grown relentlessly over the years seemed to vanish. The thought that I could be valued and appreciated even without shallow appeals to my fame eased the gloom weighing on my heart.

“As one of your chosen suitors, I wish to fight with you—to be there every time your face lights up in victory,” Rasantark said. “I want to entrust my back to you, and to charge into battle at your side.”

His smile broadened with each word. It was cute and innocent, conjuring images of a large dog.

“When this term ends, would you care to join me in challenging Lord Lestilaut to a rematch?” I asked. “I suspect it is long overdue.”

Though he would grimace at our joint challenge, Lestilaut would most certainly accept. Perhaps he would defeat us even now. Rasantark was quite the capable knight at this point, so even if victory was beyond us, I assumed we would at least be able to land a blow. It was so silly to think about that I couldn’t help but laugh.

“As amusing as they were, I know I am too old to think of ultimate moves,” I said.

“In that case, I would ask my Goddess of Seas to choose between Elbberg the God of Mountains and Brennwaerme the God of Passion,” he said, insisting I choose between Kenntrips and him.

My breath caught in my throat. I was already lost for a response, but then someone called my name, rendering me even more speechless. Though our sound-blockers prevented others from hearing us, we remained perfectly aware of the world around us. Rasantark and I wheeled around in an instant.

“I come seeking a private conversation with— What are Rasantark and Vestaert doing here?”

“Kenntrips?!”

He must have entered to the sight of our silent exchange. His brow furrowed, and he said, “Are those sound-blockers? What are you discussing?”

“We have been interrupted, it seems. I regret not receiving an

answer, but at least I have stated my case.” Rasantark grinned, then took the sound-blocker from me. “Kenntrips. We were just saying that while you might have the advantage at drying Lady Hannelore’s tears, I am the best at making her smile.”

No, we most certainly weren’t!

Kenntrips merely raised an eyebrow at the comment before turning to me. He sought an explanation, but I could hardly tell him the truth. I tried to change the subject instead.

“What brings you here, might I ask? You seek a private conversation?” I wondered how private it really was when both Rasantark and Vestaert were now privy to it.

“Codehantz here consulted me about the upcoming ditte match.”

Kenntrips turned around, urging the boy waiting behind him to step forward. He was an apprentice scholar serving Lungtase, daughter of the second wife and Raufereg’s younger sister. She had been baptized but was not yet of age to attend the Royal Academy.

“One of Lungtase’s retainers wishes to speak with me, not Raufereg?” I asked.

“I do,” Codehantz said, then presented me with a board. “We have reported recent events to our lady, and this is her response. I ask that you read it.”

Daughter of the Second Wife

Cordula moved to accept the board. “May we proceed without clearing the room or using sound-blockers?” she asked.

“Lord Kenntrips has already inspected the letter and consulted the aub,” Codehantz said. “If you wish to extend the matter to Lord Lestilaut and his retainers, that would also be acceptable.”

Whatever the news, he seemed particularly eager to spread it.

What in the world is Lungtase thinking?

I recalled her lavender hair and intelligent dark-purple eyes. She quite resembled Lady Reichlene, at least in appearance. We had met only a few times, so I had yet to form much of an opinion about her. She had always struck me as someone who simply swam with the tide, however, so her initiative to contact me came as a surprise. I wondered what she had gone out of her way to tell me.

On that note, Cordula read the letter aloud. Rasantark and Vestaert stayed to listen, having not been asked to leave.

““This is an abrupt and shameless request, but I ask to be put under your protection, Lady Hannelore.””

“U-Under my protection?!” I stammered. “What brought this on?!”

As the first and second wives, our mothers were from different factions. I could never have expected to receive such a request from Lungtase, especially when we knew so little of each other.

“Raufereg’s shortcomings have put her in danger, I assume, but should she not still support him as his sister?” I pondered. “Some of Lungtase’s guard knights volunteered to fight on his side, no?”

I retrieved the list of participants and showed it to Codehantz, who bitterly produced another board.

“This should answer your questions,” he said. “It is the letter I sent her, which she returned precisely for this moment.”

How proactive of her.

Her retainers were advising her actions, of course, but I could understand why she was known to be so competent.

““No longer can we remain neutral and avoid involving

ourselves in the upcoming match,” Cordula began, now reading Codehantz’s correspondence. ““Lord Raufereg added the names of several of your guard knights to his list of volunteers without your—or even their—approval. I protested, but he refused to listen, saying only that you are duty bound as his younger sister to assist him.””

Lungtase’s situation seemed intractable indeed.

“Raufereg volunteered guard knights without their knowledge or their lady’s permission...?” I repeated, then hung my head and sighed. “This really is problematic.”

Codehantz seemed to relax somewhat as he said, “I am glad you can sympathize.”

Out of respect for my father, Lungtase had decided to remain neutral in the upcoming ditler match. Now her retainers were being involved against her will. She was still too young to attend the Academy herself, so she could only appeal to Raufereg by letter. If he ignored her, third parties would assume she was actively supporting him as his sister.

But with their names already on the list, I doubt there’s much we can do.

“It happened when we were consulting Lady Lungtase on how to proceed,” Codehantz explained. “Before she could respond, Lord Raufereg demanded that her apprentice knights join him in training and planning for the battle to come. Lady Reichlene seems to agree; she wrote to Lord Raufereg, urging him to do everything he can to win and to use Lady Lungtase’s retainers to maximize his chances of success.”

Raufereg wasn’t acting alone, then. Lady Reichlene must have known Lungtase wouldn’t be able to stop him from outside the Royal Academy. We all gazed sympathetically upon Codehantz; this was too great a burden for a third-year.

“How strange...” I said. “I thought Lady Reichlene supported Father and agreed to see Raufereg demoted to an archnoble after the match.”

“As it stands, Lord Raufereg has no way to remain an archduke candidate except by winning,” Codehantz said. “That is why she advised him to use Lady Lungtase’s retainers. Though she has resolved to accept his fate if he loses, she would much rather he come away victorious.”

“How does that make sense?! She claims to support Father’s

decision yet actively works to undermine it!"

The passion and ferocity characteristic of our duchy was being misused. Was it not cruel to put Lungtase in danger for her brother's and mother's careless whims?

"At this rate, Lady Reichlene could be cut off with him..." Cordula muttered.

I gave a quick nod. My father had agreed to the dinner match as a way of crushing the problematic Raufereg. Lady Reichlene's actions could very well see her deemed a risk to the duchy and removed from her position as second wife.

"I understand why Lady Reichlene, as his mother, might be driven to protect him, but was no one there to advise her?" I continued. "And, mother or no, it is unacceptable to give orders to another person's retainers at such a critical juncture. Lungtase will have to bear the consequences through no fault of her own."

Yes, a person's actions could negatively impact their retainers, but the inverse was also true. It was for that reason that, after a child was baptized and moved to the northern building, not even their parents could order their retainers about freely. At most, they could ask for reports on their child, extend summons to them, or help plan their education.

"When Lord Raufereg was denied permission to attend the transference ceremony, the aub offered to have him adopted by an archnoble," Codehantz said with a sigh. "If only Lady Reichlene had agreed."

I knew Raufereg's head attendant considered him unfit to be an archduke candidate, but not that Father had considered having the boy adopted before he even attended the Academy.

That explains the head attendant's attitude.

He had struck me as someone who had given up on his lord, but perhaps he was working to see Raufereg reduced to an archnoble posthaste, even rallying the other retainers to that effect. Father might even have ordered it. Raufereg's proposal, which so egregiously went against the aub's wishes, had given us grounds to deal with him before he could cause problems with other duchies.

"Do you know why Lady Reichlene refused?" I asked.

"Well..." Codehantz met my gaze, then promptly lowered his eyes. His silence told me he couldn't say, which meant it must have involved me in some capacity. The bride-stealing dinner match was surely to blame.

Should we tell him?

I glanced at Cordula, who relented with a sigh.

“Lord Lestilaut and Lady Hannelore shamed themselves by losing against Ehrenfest, but the aub gave them a chance to redeem themselves,” she said. “As we understand it, Lady Reichlene asked that Raufereg be shown the same mercy. Is that correct?”

“More or less.”

Our defeat by Lady Rozemyne had spurred some Dunkelfelger nobles to argue that the next aub should come from the second wife instead. Lady Reichlene must have become too fond of the idea.

“Lady Hannelore cleared her name through true ditte, and Lord Lestilaut by inheriting the foundation, but Lady Reichlene and her family still refuse to give up on their ambitions,” Codehantz explained. They might have been the first to propose that Raufereg and I get married.

“Even if my brother had never redeemed himself, Father would have preferred him as the next aub over Raufereg,” I said. “That should have been clear when Raufereg was forbidden from joining the transference ceremony.”

“Lady Reichlene refused to abandon hope, not wanting to see her son demoted. I sympathize with her, to a degree, but I wish she had not roped my lady into this.” Codehantz let out a heavy sigh, then faced me head-on. “That is why Lady Lungtase began consulting not her mother, but the aub on certain matters after the transference ceremony. Upon hearing of Lady Reichlene’s orders and the current situation here at the Academy, she elected to seek your protection.”

Lungtase would need my assurance before the ditte match, lest she be demoted with her brother, but I couldn’t make the decision alone. At the very least, I would need to consult my brother and father.

“Though I recognize her predicament, I find it strange she has come to me, of all people,” I said. “Why not ask my father, the aub; my brother, his successor; or either of their first wives?”

My retainers agreed—there were others better suited to the task. I stared at Codehantz, urging him to answer.

“Again, I have a letter to explain that.”

“If you have information to give, Codehantz, then give it all at once. I do not have time to receive it piecemeal.”

“Lady Lungtase says that too, but producing the letters as they

become relevant makes them easier to follow,” he said, passing a single board to Cordula with a smile. Something told me it wouldn’t be the last one.

“What a curt list...” Cordula murmured. ““To maintain an ideal distance from Lady Eineliebe, to prove that Lady Hannelore holds no grudge against the second wife’s faction, and to resolve things quickly before the upcoming ditter match.’ Is this Lady Lungtase’s reasoning? I must admit, I find it rather hard to follow. What does she mean by maintaining an ‘ideal distance’ from Lady Eineliebe?”

Indeed, Lungtase had done very little to elaborate. I asked Codehantz to explain on her behalf.

“Lady Reichlene played an active role in managing Old Werkestock,” he began. “You all know that much, correct?”

“Yes, of course.”

After the civil war, Dunkelfelger had been tasked with managing half of Old Werkestock. As its own duchy with its own border, it required a great deal of attention to keep its otherwise barren land supplied with mana, and to circumvent the restrictions on using ordonnanzes to communicate. Her involvement was the reason most Old Werkestock nobles were part of her faction.

“Now that the borders have been redrawn, Lady Reichlene no longer has need to travel there, and Lady Eineliebe is inheriting her duties.”

In Dunkelfelger, the aub’s wives each had their own duties to attend to. The first oversaw relations with other duchies. The second oversaw and delegated work to the nobles. The third aided the first wherever she could. Women who married into the duchy often struggled to manage its nobles, so the system had proven especially successful.

Because of the civil war, however, Mother had gone from being the second wife to the first. Her previous position meant she had already been popular with the duchy’s nobles. Father had married Lady Reichlene as a means of easing the burden of managing Old Werkestock, and a new faction had sprung up under her as a result.

“With the border gone, the aub hopes to gather Old Werkestock’s nobles under Lady Eineliebe,” Codehantz said. “If she and Lady Lungtase got too close, it could get in the way of that.”

Now that she had married into the archducal family, Eineliebe had to secure as much backing as she could. My brother would surely take issue with anyone who interfered with her efforts.

"I see," I said. "It really would be wise to minimize contact, then. What about her second point—to show I don't hold a grudge against the second wife's faction?"

"Agreeing to protect Lady Lungtase will show that, though you have rejected Lord Raufereg, you have nothing against the second wife's faction itself," Codehantz said. He spoke as though it were obvious, but I didn't quite follow him.

"Despite the ditter match...?"

"Um... Only those born and raised in Dunkelfelger think that way. The majority of the second wife's faction are Old Werkestock nobles, remember."

"What? That's..."

I went quiet. More than a decade had passed since Dunkelfelger started managing Old Werkestock, yet it seemed the gulf between our ways of thinking was even greater than I'd thought.

"Well, as for this third point, I agree we have extraordinarily little time before the match. On that count, it makes sense to ask me, the person overseeing it, to protect her apprentice guard knights and other retainers."

Even if the aub had agreed to protect her, it would have taken too long for his confirmation to reach the Royal Academy. Everyone would have seen Lungtase's retainers fighting under Raufereg, cementing her fate.

"As reasonable as it sounds..." one of my retainers said.

"Could it not be seen as Lady Lungtase exploiting Lady Hannelore for Lord Raufereg's gain?" another added.

"We have no way of knowing if her knights were forced to side with him. Perhaps they volunteered themselves."

Codehantz shook his head. "Absolutely not. Lady Lungtase—"

"Codehantz," I said, cutting him short. "I understand the position your lady is in, and that time truly is of the essence, yet I must consult the aub as she did. I cannot act without his permission."

As an archduke candidate, refusing Lungtase outright would be far better for my reputation than risking her manipulating me before she had even joined the Academy. I knew Father intended to cut ties with Raufereg, so it was only natural to be wary of the boy's sister.

"I will ask him, though I cannot guarantee he will respond before the match. If she truly has consulted him, I trust a letter from

him will arrive in short order.”

No sooner had the words left my mouth than an ordonnanz shot into the room, sent by the knight manning the teleportation hall. “Lady Hannelore, a letter from the aub has arrived,” it said. “I must ask that you retrieve it.”

“Luitpold,” I said.

“At once!”

He fetched the letter at once. Its contents matched Lungtase’s letters and Codehantz’s explanation.

“Father agrees that I should take Lungtase under my wing,” I said, easing the tension in the room in a heartbeat. Codehantz took the opportunity to pull out yet another board, which Cordula accepted with an irritated smile.

“I hereby grant Lady Hannelore permission to lead my retainers in the upcoming ditter match.’ Goodness... Though it might be for their protection, entrusting them to another is a rather bold move.”

Though she was acting to avoid the lifelong consequences that would come from being dragged down with Raufereg and her mother, I couldn’t help but admire Lungtase’s quick wit and determination. She truly was a woman of Dunkelfelger.

“I wish to make it clear that Lungtase has sided with us rather than Raufereg,” I said, looking over all those gathered. “Rasantark, Vestaert—I shall leave it to you to decide what role her apprentice knights will play in the ditter match. Having them pretend to be on Raufereg’s side goes without saying, so we might learn as much about our enemy as we can, but you should work with Codehantz to decide whether they should reveal their betrayal at the very start of the match, or whether they should pretend to fight for him to keep him in the dark.”

“Understood,” the pair said with nods. I was entrusting the matter to them because they were serving as our commanders.

“Kenntrips,” I continued, “to destroy them from within, what do you say to speaking with Raufereg’s head attendant?”

“To what end?”

Our current situation was the result of Lady Reichlene’s ambitions. Raufereg’s head attendant knew his lord wasn’t fit to be an archduke candidate, and it seemed reasonable to assume Father had told the head attendant that he and his fellow retainers would serve the boy for only a single year.

“If we can find out how much Father is instructing Raufereg’s retainers, we can make a more informed decision on how to treat them going forward. Can you get that information?”

“You can count on me,” Kenntrips said with a low chuckle. Extracting such sensitive information from someone capable enough to have been made a head attendant wouldn’t be simple, but I trusted he would manage.

“Codehantz—I wish to send a letter to Lungtase, to bring her peace of mind.”

“We would greatly appreciate that. Oh, and Lady Hannelore... This is the last board I have for you. I was told to present it only if you agreed to protect her.”

Codehantz presented one more board, which bore a single sentence: “*As I am now under your protection, Lady Hannelore, may I address you as my big sister?*”

Me? A big sister?

At once, my thoughts turned to Lady Rozemyne and Lady Charlotte. They were surprisingly close, considering one of them was adopted. Lungtase and I weren’t sisters of the same mother, but perhaps we could get along just as well.

As agreed, the match between Rasantark and Raufereg began after dinner. It was treasure-stealing ditter, though it differed in two key ways from the version played in class and elsewhere.

First, the use of offensive magic tools was forbidden. With bride-stealing ditter on the horizon, we couldn’t risk apprentice scholars using this smaller game to test out their latest and greatest creations. Those tools were to be used in a match encompassing the entire Royal Academy; they were far too lethal for our dormitory’s training grounds. A single experimental tool could end the match in one fell blow, not to mention the risk of death among those watching and participating. Several apprentice scholars had complained, but we had quashed their protests with the promise of a tool-centered contest at a later date.

Second, we were using unconventional treasures. Professor Rauffen had stopped us from hunting feybeasts in the forest, for the sun had set some time ago, and insisted instead on the use of gewinnen pieces. These were no normal pieces, however, but rather those used during the debriefs after large-scale matches held at the Academy. Each was the size of a child. Rasantark’s home territory

would contain a spear piece, and Raufereg's, a sword.

Once filled with mana, a gewinnen piece could be controlled from afar, enabling its master to move it when it was in danger of being stolen. Naturally, given the rules of the game, moving one's piece outside of one's territory would count as defeat, even if only to escape one's enemy.

And with Lungtase's knights assigned to guard Raufereg's piece...

No matter how one looked at it, the boy had no chance of victory.

"The aub has insisted we treat this game as we would a training match," Professor Rauffen announced. "No lives are to be taken. Its purpose is purely to decide who shall represent us in the upcoming bride-stealing ditter match. Is that understood, everyone?"

Rasantark and Raufereg agreed to the terms and made their vows. Apprentice knights gathered in their territories.

"Now... begin!"

Professor Rauffen threw his arms up, and the transparent blue gewinnen pieces launched skyward. He had dyed both with his mana, and the game would begin with each team seizing and dyeing their respective piece.

In both camps, highbeasts swarmed to grab their treasures, but Professor Rauffen kept the pieces away from them with swift chops through the air. He could manipulate them until they were completely dyed over, which made for a humorous display. Hoots and hollers of "Come on, catch it!" and "It's gonna get away!" erupted from the spectators.

When the pieces were eventually captured and safely in their respective territories, the knights shifted to the offensive. Rasantark led his vanguard to obliterate their enemies, and Raufereg flew out gleefully to meet them.

"Lord Raufereg's knights seem more enthusiastic than I expected," I said.

"His retainers knew even before he entered the Academy that their time in his service would be limited," Kenntrips explained. "They wish to enjoy this final ditter match as much as they possibly can."

Kenntrips understood the situation because Raufereg's head attendant had explained it to him personally. Raufereg had initially been due to be reduced to an archnoble before joining the Academy, and his retainers had been chosen purely to keep up

appearances in the meantime. Thus, beyond the most exceptionally hopeless among them, they were all due to be inherited either by Father or by Lungtase. The head attendant had said they had already decided who was useful and who wasn't.

What a fool Raufereg is...

If only things had never spiraled into bride-stealing ditter. If only Korinthsdaum hadn't proposed. Or, before even that, if only Lady Reichlene had agreed to his adoption before he entered the Royal Academy. There was no use in dwelling on it, but I couldn't help myself. An archduke candidate not fit for the role naturally had to have it taken from him.

Even I constantly fear being labeled a failure.

As those thoughts ran through my mind, I returned my attention to the ditter match. Rasantark and Raufereg had both left as few knights as they reasonably could to defend their treasures, focusing instead on attacking. Rasantark's group seemed to be restraining their opponents to reduce their number.

Are they competing to see who can bind the most people?

Raufereg was energetic, but it didn't make up for his smaller frame and lack of experience. Though his apprentice guard knights took up a defensive formation around him, they were quickly bound and cast aside.

Is the aim for Rasantark and Raufereg to duel...?

This was an ideal opportunity for Raufereg to learn the limits of his strength and how foolish it had been for him, a first-year, to issue a bride-stealing ditter challenge in the first place. Perhaps a scathing defeat here would teach him to better acknowledge the talents of those around him as an archknight. If nothing else, he needed to be humbled.

Yet as the match went on, I found myself sympathizing not with Raufereg but with Rasantark. No matter how much he beat Raufereg down, the boy simply refused to accept defeat.

"I know Rasantark must press on until victory is his, but... this almost seems like bullying," I said. "I feel for him that he was forced to take this role. It cannot be easy for him."

"Indeed," Kenntrips muttered. "Especially when he must be careful not to land a lethal strike."

"Raufereg is already in such bad shape, yet he still won't even reach for a rejuvenation potion. It must be hard for Rasantark to keep reining in his attacks."

“The boy has been so thoroughly bested yet refuses to admit defeat. It’s unsightly. There is no enjoyment to be had in a match this one-sided.”

“For all our sakes,” Cordula interjected, “perhaps now is a good time to end it.”

I formed my schtappe, produced a green light on its tip, and swirled it through the air. Lungtase’s apprentice knights recognized the signal, and the person among them who had infused the gewinnen piece with mana swung his arm, launching the treasure up into the air and out of Raufereg’s territory. Professor Rauffen’s booming shout marked the end of the match.

“Rasantark wins!”

Whirling Practice

“Good morning, Lady Hannelore,” Cordula said. “You are free until whirling practice this afternoon. It seems an excellent opportunity to work with Luitpold to finish the last of the relevant paperwork.”

The previous night’s ditter match had created all manner of administrative headaches, and the sooner I put them behind me, the better. It was a good thing I had finished all of my shared morning classes.

“It really is a shame that Elusia is busy with practicals; her assistance as a sixth-year would have been greatly appreciated,” I said. “I shall ask the first- and third-year apprentice scholars who have finished their written lessons to write documents, partly for practice. Will Luitpold be able to instruct them on his own?”

“It will take longer than I would prefer, but he should manage.”

The reports and applications submitted for practice matches held between students at the dormitory weren’t the same as those submitted for matches of a more political nature held at the aub’s request. If we entrusted the task to students, treating it as a learning experience, I suspected they would finish their reports on the match and their request for a magic tool competition just before lunch.

“Now, let us head to the dining hall.”

Together, we made our way downstairs for breakfast. There, I informed Rasantark and Raufereg that they would need to submit reports as representatives of the recently concluded ditter match.

“Though it took place in the dormitory, it was held at the aub’s instruction,” I explained. “If your reports aren’t handed in soon, the ditter treasurers will give us all an earful.”

“Well, don’t warn me,” Raufereg shot back. “Paperwork’s for scholars.”

Before the boy could say another word, his head attendant grabbed him by the shoulders and said, “Understood. The aub has summoned Lord Raufereg back to Dunkelfelger, so we shall complete the paperwork this morning before our departure in the

afternoon. He will not join you for whirling class.”

Raufereg needed to speak with Father about his future and the restrictions to be imposed on him before we could permit him to interact with other duchies. I nodded, then glanced at the soon-to-be archnoble, who seemed none the wiser about his situation.

“You would do well to understand that, until you learn to do paperwork yourself, you will not be allowed to play any more ditter matches,” I said. “Only here at the Academy can you rely on your retainers to aid you.”

Raufereg nodded, but the truth was obvious: He would entrust the paperwork entirely to his retainers.

“That goes for you as well, Rasantark,” I said. “Try to do some of the paperwork yourself, rather than leaving it all to Kenntrips.”

“Ngh...”

“I have practical classes this morning,” Kenntrips noted, clapping Rasantark on the shoulder with a bright grin. “That gives you plenty of time to devote to your paperwork. Best of luck.”

Four chimes rang out.

“I see no issues with your paperwork. You may send it along to Dunkelfelger.”

Her inspection complete, Cordula sent one of the first-year apprentice scholars to deliver their documents to the teleportation hall. Luitpold and the others put away their utensils while the attendants set about cleaning the meeting room.

“As expected, it took us all the way up to lunch,” Cordula mused. “Eat quickly, milady. You still need to change for whirling practice.”

After a quick lunch, I changed clothes and started toward the Small Hall. We archduke candidates would all practice whirling, while the other students would be split between music and sword dancing.

“Will you speak with Lord Ortwin?” Rasantark asked, an anxious waver to his voice as he escorted me to class.

“I cannot say if he will approach me with archduke candidates of all years in attendance. But after he gave me time to consult my father, I feel that I should at least dignify him with a response. Fear not; I will refuse him this time.”

“I can’t help worrying. Lord Ortwin is more obstinate than we expected. Are you not worried as well, Kenntrips?” Rasantark

asked, turning to his fellow suitor on my left.

Kenntrips sighed, openly exasperated. "Lady Hannelore chose to stay in Dunkelfelger. You know that, right?"

"I do, but what if she still yearns for another?"

"Are you implying that Lord Ortwin won my heart?" I asked with a stern pout—at exactly the same time that Kenntrips muttered, "Fair enough." I turned to him, still processing his response as he smiled and continued.

"As a devoted reader of Ehrenfest's love stories, you are painfully weak to seduction of any kind."

"Wh-What a terribly rude thing to say!" I exclaimed, upset but unable to deny it.

I mean, the stories are wonderful...

As if to spare me from the awkward silence that followed, my female retainers began to giggle.

"Perhaps Lord Rasantark should try his hand at writing a flirtatious line or two."

"I could lend him my copies of Ehrenfest's love stories."

"If saying them aloud is too embarrassing, why not put them in a letter?"

"You are a scholar, Lord Kenntrips. Why not devote some of your research time to romance?"

"Th-That's enough," I stammered. "We are drawing too much attention from the other duchies."

Their chattering was attracting far too many looks for my liking. And if their remarks convinced my suitors to be even more romantic, I feared my heart would give out from embarrassment.

"Here we are, Lady Hannelore. We shall return when your class ends."

"Good luck with your practice."

When we arrived outside the Small Hall, I parted ways with my retainers and went inside. No sooner had I entered than a familiar voice greeted me.

"Lady Hannelore. It's been some time."

Because whirling practice brought together archduke candidates of all grades, it was considered a place to socialize before the official socializing period began. Most would take the opportunity to connect with archduke candidates of other grades and to gather as much intelligence about other duchies as they could.

“Good day, Lord Hildebrand,” I said. “How are your classes going?”

Father and Lady Eglantine had asked me to treat Lord Hildebrand like family, but I was so used to him being royalty that I found that hard to manage. Only with great care was I able to adjust my way of speaking to him.

“Well, thank you. I am told I should be done soon,” he replied. “It is a shame that, with Lady Rozemyne’s invitation to the world of the gods, we have not had any tea parties at the library as of late. Speaking of which... I do not see Lord Raufereg with you.”

“Are you friends, perhaps? It would not surprise me, given your age. Raufereg is terribly ill today, so his head attendant has advised that he stay in his room and rest.”

I made sure to speak vaguely, leaving it up to interpretation whether I was making an excuse or Raufereg was genuinely unwell. Given his connection to Lord Sigiswald, Lord Hildebrand could potentially relay anything I told him to Korinthsdaum.

“Until next time,” he said. “Let us hold another tea party when it comes time to socialize again.”

No sooner had the former prince left than Lady Gentiane approached me, seizing the opportunity she had doubtless been waiting for. “Greetings, Lady Hannelore. Do you have time for a quick question? I wished to ask you on the day of the Zent’s announcement, but you were rather difficult to approach...”

She held out a sound-blocker, and I blinked at her in surprise. Whatever she wished to ask, it seemed far more important than the usual exchange of greetings. I accepted the tool, recognizing the anxiety in her blue eyes.

“I understand that the Goddess of Time descended into you. Might you know where Lady Rozemyne went after accepting her summons?”

Though prying into the goddess’s descent, she seemed more concerned with Lady Rozemyne’s whereabouts than anything else. Her worry was most certainly the result of Aub Klassenberg sternly insisting she obtain more information on the matter. Seeing her lack of confidence as an archduke candidate, I was swiftly reminded of my own former insecurities.

“I am aware that Lady Rozemyne is helping the gods,” I said. “Is there something in particular you wish to know?”

“Um... Could she have traveled to the past? Out of the blue, one

of our nobles has reported remembering a woman who suddenly arrived at the Sovereignty at the Goddess of Time's guidance."

Dunkelfelger's knights had reported seeing her during a hunting trip at the Royal Academy, so I suspected she had already moved on to her next location. I wondered how many cuts in the thread she had repaired at this point.

"If the woman they remember invoked the Goddess of Time, it probably was Lady Rozemyne," I said. "Was the person who regained this memory not at the Zent's transference ceremony?"

If they had attended, they would surely have recognized her. But which Sovereign noble had been absent for the ceremony?

Lady Gentiane paused as if debating whether she should answer, then nodded. "The information came from a scholar who served the Zent before Lord Trauerqual but resigned before the civil war due to poor health. Their old age and infirmity keeps them from participating in Royal Academy events. They would have asked the others they worked with if they had the same memory, but they were all embroiled in the war, so there is little chance they are still around today..."

The palace had its own share of atrocities, I'm sure.

I, too, wondered what Lady Rozemyne was doing in the Sovereignty. For a retainer of one of the past Zents to have seen her, she must have been at the palace, but how were the Zent and the Sovereignty at all related to Lord Ferdinand's thread? They had little to do with Ehrenfest or the Royal Academy proper.

"What was the woman they saw doing?" I asked.

"I was not told," Lady Gentiane said, lowering her eyes. "I was merely told to ask you whether it was Lady Rozemyne, and whether she has gone back in time."

Her aub would surely run her through the wringer if she returned to him empty-handed. I could not help but feel sorry for her, considering how unsuccessful she had been in her attempts to form a meaningful connection with Lady Rozemyne over the past year.

Could her timing be even worse than mine?

"Unfortunately, I do not know Lady Rozemyne's current location," I said. "I can tell you, however, that the woman you speak of was most certainly her. Several of our nobles had a similar experience, suddenly claiming to have seen her well before her time."

"They did?" Lady Gentiane asked, looking up at me in surprise. She must not have expected me to reveal such sensitive information.

"I do not know the details, but I pray Lady Rozemyne completes the mission the gods have given her and returns to us safely."

"I thank you ever so much," Lady Gentiane replied. "I, too, shall pray." She was clutching her chest with relief, having received more from me than she had ever hoped.

I returned the sound-blocker, bade her farewell with a smile, and strode toward the back of the room where the older students had gathered. I had barely taken a few steps when I saw Lady Letizia surrounded by several archduke candidates, looking rather troubled. She was probably being questioned about Lady Rozemyne. Even if the older students meant her no harm, she must have been nervous to have them all towering over her.

Being surrounded is uncomfortable enough when it's your guard knights. But when it's archduke candidates of other duchies... Well, the potential impact on interduchy relations makes it a hundred times worse.

I was still debating whether I should intervene when Lady Letizia met my eye. Seeing her troubled expression, I knew what I had to do.

"Good day, Lady Letizia. Might I borrow you for a moment? Once you have finished greeting everyone, that is."

The other archduke candidates took turns greeting me before taking their leave. I returned my attention to the first-year girl.

"Your aub is still absent. Is Alexandria keeping strong without her?"

"Yes, indeed. I thank you ever so much for your concern." Though she strove to hide it, I could sense her worry that Lady Rozemyne had yet to return.

"She must be doing well. A former retainer of a past Zent claims to have remembered seeing her in the Sovereignty before the days of the civil war. Let us pray she returns soon."

Lady Letizia's face slowly blossomed into a smile. "I thank you ever so much. I shall inform her retainers."

"Forgive me for asking, but should you not stay close to Lord Hildebrand? His status as former royalty still carries weight, and though his classmates might never have known him as a prince, what remains of his authority should still keep the older students at bay."

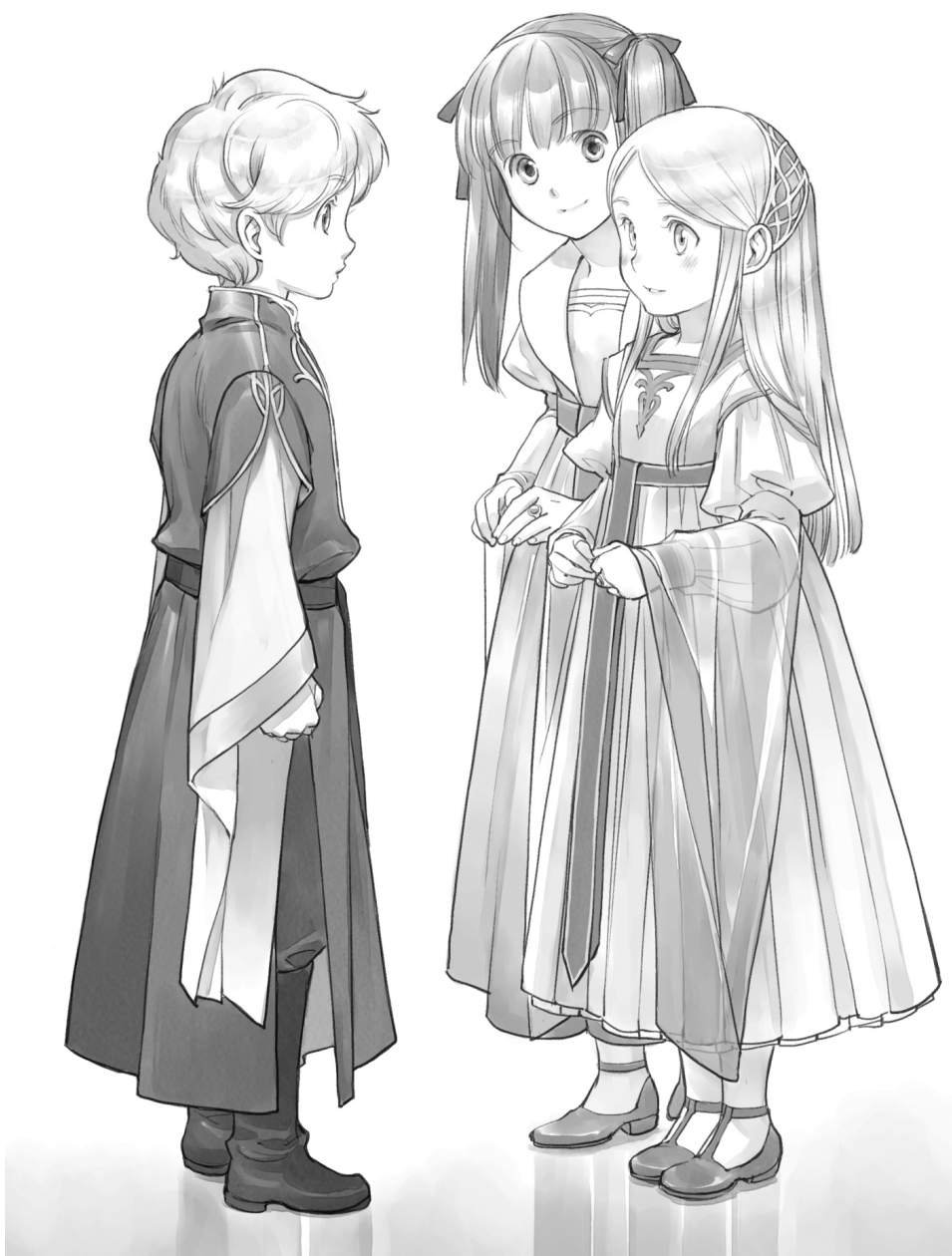
Lord Hildebrand had served as the Royal Academy's overseer for quite some time, so I wasn't the only one who found him difficult to interact with. Korinthsdaum was already using its authority to rally nobles of other duchies, so I saw nothing wrong with Lord Hildebrand using his to protect his fiancée.

"Um... I would rather not impose on him..." Lady Letizia said shyly. "He might want to interact with the older students, in which case I would only be getting in his way."

Despite her apprehension, I took her straight to the former prince and asked him to protect his fiancée until the day Lady Rozemyne returned.

"I see..." he said. "Very well. I shall do my best to stay with her during whirling practice."

"I apologize for the trouble."



They were both clearly uncomfortable, smiles plastered on their faces, but that was perfectly natural. This must have been their first time seeing each other since their engagement was announced by royal decree. When my suitors had first been chosen, I had found myself equally unsure how to interact with them.

If only Lady Rozemyne were here... She has such a knack for bringing people together.

A sigh escaped me just as the professors came into the hall. It was almost time for us to separate by age and start practicing.

Without further delay, I hurried to where the fifth-years had gathered. Lord Ortwin and Lord Wilfried had arrived ahead of me, and as the others were all our usual classmates, I settled on a simple, standard greeting for them. Lord Ortwin seemed to want to say something to me, but our professor spoke before he could.

“Now that Lady Hannelore has returned, I have an important announcement for the fifth-years before we begin.”

Something must have come up in my absence. The professors must not have wanted to reveal it while both Aub Alexandria and an archduke candidate of the top-ranking duchy were away, so they had waited for at least one of us to return. I lowered my eyes in a silent apology.

“Because of the dearth of sixth-year archduke candidates, we have decided to choose one fifth-year to join them in this year’s performance,” the professor continued. “I shall select the dancer and their backup today, and they will practice with the sixth-years henceforth.”

Only seven students were needed for next year’s dedication whirl, and our grade totaled ten—one boy and two girls too many. Though, as Lady Rozemyne had already asked to perform among the musicians, only one girl in our grade would ultimately be left out.

“Both the performer and their backup will need to dress for the occasion, so I would rather choose someone who has no prior arrangements for this year’s graduation ceremony.” The professor turned to me. “How fares your schedule, Lady Hannelore?”

“I plan to attend this year’s ceremony with one of my suitors,” I said, refusing at once.

Lord Ortwin’s eyes widened in shock at the reveal, though I

couldn't understand why. The match to decide my future husband wasn't scheduled until after the graduation ceremony, meaning Kenntrips would inevitably be my suitor at that moment in time. He couldn't invite any other girls, as a matter of course, and was escorting me by necessity.

"Lady Rozemyne has also expressed a desire not to whirl, since she performed during the transference ceremony."

"Oh my. Is that so?" the professor asked, taken aback.

I conveyed Lord Ferdinand and Lady Rozemyne's concerns. It was one thing to raise a pillar of light, but inviting the gods down as she had done before would reduce the ceremony to a state of complete and utter chaos.

"Certainly, we do not want her to move the statues or vanish mid-performance," the professor mused with a wry smile, evidently recalling the events of the transference ceremony.

"The Zent should elaborate, but it would be best to assume Lady Rozemyne will not participate in the dedication whirl," I said. "She hopes to play music even during her own graduation ceremony."

"Ah, but I was so looking forward to the dancing lights of her performance during the graduation ceremony..." the professor lamented, but the matter was practically set in stone. Lady Rozemyne had seemed certain that Lord Ferdinand would oppose her involvement, and with the gods' continued interference in the mortal realm, I very much doubted that would change.

"Perhaps the best course of action would be to choose someone who won't be able to participate in our whirling next year," I said. Though skill played a crucial role in deciding who would get to perform, the duchy rankings were just as important. I sincerely doubted Lady Friederike would get to whirl during her own ceremony.

"Certainly..." the professor mused. "In that case, I must insist that Lady Friederike perform this year, with Lady Margarethe as her backup."

"I accept," Lady Friederike said, then went with the professor to start practicing with the sixth-years. I watched as she was instructed to take the role of the Goddess of Wind. Only when the professor returned did we start practicing ourselves.

"Take some time to rest, everyone," the professor announced.

Lord Ortwin approached me without a moment's hesitation. "Lady Hannelore, may I speak with you?" It was just as Rasantark had feared.

"If this truly is important, I can arrange for us to meet in Dunkelfelger's tea party room," I said.

"I would rather we speak here, away from your suitors. Fear not, for we won't be alone."

As much as I hated having an audience, having the other students around would completely change the dynamic of our conversation. We weren't alone, and my answer wasn't going to change. I gestured for us to retire to some chairs by the wall.

A Breaktime Conversation

“Here,” Lord Ortwin said, taking out a sound-blocker. I accepted it, and he stared at me intently. “You said you plan to attend this year’s graduation ceremony with one of your suitors as an escort. Has the aub commanded it?”

That is his concern, not the information I exchanged with Father? How strange... Does he not care about my response to his proposal?

I took in a sharp breath despite myself. I had intended to share the intelligence I obtained in Dunkelfelger, clarify the misconceptions that had come up during our tea party, and then finally respond to his proposal. Had I not said I would give him my verdict the next time our threads were woven together?

How is Kenntrips’s graduation ceremony more important?

Our break wouldn’t be very long, so we had only a short time to talk. I would have thought he would jump straight to the matter of his proposal, yet here we were.

“Are you truly invested in Kenntrips’s graduation ceremony?” I asked.

“Extremely,” he answered. The response troubled me a little, but I saw no reason not to play along.

“Father hasn’t forced my hand, no,” I said. “The bride-stealing ditter match is not due to be held until after the graduation ceremony, and as Kenntrips cannot invite another girl to accompany him while he is one of my suitors, we have taken another approach. Is it not natural that he would escort me?”

Lord Ortwin frowned. “If you let him escort you for his graduation, people will think you chose him as your future partner.”

“Would they, even after the Zent finalized the upcoming ditter match?”

That match would decide my future husband. I doubted anyone would misunderstand my relationship with Kenntrips when the Zent had informed every student of archnoble rank or above about it.

“The very purpose of bride-stealing ditter is to force a woman

to marry someone against her will. And during their graduation ceremony, most men choose to escort either their fiancée, an elderly relative, or a love interest from whom they will need to separate after graduating.”

“True enough,” I said.

“Thus, anyone who sees the two of you hand in hand will assume you are romantically involved. Considering how many others seek to wed you, I think it is best for you not to appear with anyone during this year’s graduation ceremony.”

I raised an eyebrow, still not sure what he was so concerned about. What did it matter if people thought something was going on between Kenntrips and me? The ditto match would settle everything once and for all.

“If Kenntrips escorted another student or a family member, it could be seen as an expression of discontent with being chosen as one of my suitors,” I said. “Considering his position within the duchy, it is important that he escort me.”

Lord Ortwin’s frown deepened. “That is not what I meant...”

“I appreciate your advice and your worry for me, but you need not concern yourself with any gossip you might hear,” I assured him. I was rather well accustomed to rumors putting me in uncomfortable positions. Compared to all the fuss about my becoming the second divine avatar, a brief period of confusion about my relationship with Kenntrips was nothing.

“As someone who has proposed to you, Lady Hannelore, this is of great importance to me. I cannot bear even the thought of having to watch you be escorted by another man.”

“Come again?!” I exclaimed, stunned silent by his reasoning.

In other words... he’s jealous?!

“How... very roundabout of you,” I said. “That has nothing to do with others misinterpreting where I stand with Kenntrips.”

Perhaps because of the serious look in Lord Ortwin’s eyes, or because of the irrelevant excuses he’d given, I felt a sudden warmth rush to my cheeks. My own eyes wavered as I fought my usual urge to flee.

“If I had said it from the start, would your answer have changed? Would you be more considerate of my feelings?”

His feelings...?

At once, I recalled all the romantic things he had said to me during our tea party. I was amazed I remembered them so clearly.

“Will you entrust your thread to me, Lady Hannelore?”

So passionate was the light in Lord Ortwin’s light-brown eyes that I almost nodded without thinking. But as soon as my heart began to waver, I thought back to my father’s hard gaze when he had asked me to vow not to help our foes. My thoughts also turned to Rasantark’s concern upon warning me of Lord Ortwin’s persistence, and Kenntrips’s amusement when he said that even the clumsiest romantic remarks could sway me.

I took a steadying breath and held Lord Ortwin’s gaze.

“Forgive me, but... as an archduke candidate of Dunkelfelger, I cannot return your affection. Allow me to convey what my father said.”

I detailed the events of my return to Dunkelfelger, my conversation about misconceptions with Father, and the fact that, while neither party was lying, we had both interpreted things rather broadly.

“Did Aub Dunkelfelger forbid me from courting you?” Lord Ortwin asked, his expression unchanging. He had almost certainly misinterpreted my father on purpose and would continue to pursue me whether it was sanctioned or not.

“No,” I replied. “My parents told me trickery is common in the scholar-dominated duchy of Drewanchel. Each duchy has its own reputation, and Father understands that working with Drewanchel could open us up to potential disadvantages.”

“I see. That’s a relief,” Lord Ortwin said with a smile. I could tell it wasn’t genuine, so the curve to his lips made me cautious more than anything.

Around Lord Ortwin, I always had to act my best. The smallest shift of my eyes or an errant word would reveal far more than I intended, and he always seemed to know exactly what to say to manipulate me. I could hardly relax when speaking with him.

“However, with understanding comes doubt. I no longer know how much I can trust your proposal. I cannot help but feel that your courtship is all part of a broader scheme.”

Though I understood politics was an inherent part of marriage between archduke candidates, I felt nothing but displeasure when I sensed deceit from those meant to win my heart. Perhaps it was a consequence of my admiration for those who gave courtship magic tools out of genuine affection above all else. Thoughts of the magic tool Lord Sigiswald had gifted Lady Rozemyne certainly didn’t help.

"Can you not trust me?" Lord Ortwin asked. "My feelings might seem sudden to you, Lady Hannelore, but that is far from true."

"I understand that Drewanchel expressed an interest in me during the last Archduke Conference."

"You do?" Surprise overcame Lord Ortwin's features. "I thought that was being kept secret."

I explained that I had found out just the day before, and that my lack of knowledge about the situation was why his initial proposal had unsettled me so much.

"And that is not all," I said. "I also know that before Drewanchel inquired about me, they first sought the hand of Lady Rozemyne or Zent Eglantine."

Lord Ortwin's expression changed as he understood what I was working toward. "I expressed no interest in either of them. That was my father seeking compensation for my elder sister's divorce."

So he said, but why would I believe him? I could think of no way to confirm whether he was telling me the truth.

Lord Ortwin must have seen the hopeless suspicion on my face because he pressed a hand to his forehead. "You seem very skeptical indeed. Where can I begin to earn your trust? It was true what I said—that I have heard the blooming of schmelumes unending since our threads were woven together, and that I thought of you as one who walked the path lit by Sterrat."

"I... I see."

But that doesn't change the fact I rejected him. How could I put it any more clearly? Was firmly stating that I do not reciprocate his feelings not enough?!

I let my eyes wander, having not expected him to try his hand at seduction yet again. I had hoped someone would come forward to save me, but the other students were all too caught up in their own conversations and attempts to gather information. A few glanced at me, but not one of them wanted to intervene. They wouldn't even come close to us.

"You were quite a surprise at the Royal Academy last year," Lord Ortwin continued. "There was a clear chasm of sorts between your retainers and you, as if you were meant to be engaged to Wilfried yet never saw it through."

I couldn't suppress a gasp. "Who told you that?"

"When my elder sister explained her various concerns about the royal family, she said that Sovereign knights had intruded on a

bride-taking ditto match between Ehrenfest and Dunkelfelger. I assumed that you and Wilfried had fallen for each other under my nose and that, if you took his hand during the match, your engagement would be announced during the Archduke Conference.”

So, Lord Ortwin heard this from Lady Adolphine. I wonder if she heard it from Professor Rauffen...

The misunderstandings between Dunkelfelger and Ehrenfest had become apparent during the Interduchy Tournament, and we ultimately accepted Ehrenfest’s terms after their victory. My chance of being taken as a bride vanished then, though we made no effort to spread that news.

“The two of you were never formally engaged,” Lord Ortwin continued, “and while Wilfried was the same as ever, you did not look like a girl who had won love through ditto. Your face was stiff with tension, and you were on guard against everyone. You reminded me of my sister after she married Lord Sigiswald—and that brought me nothing but displeasure.”

From there, he had begun gathering information and learned that it had been bride-stealing ditto, not bride-taking ditto, and that the engagement had been canceled at Ehrenfest’s request.

“Upon learning that you had been put in such hurtful circumstances by a broken promise, I wanted to help you if I could, so I asked Father to inquire about an engagement at the Archduke Conference,” he said. In the end, various changes in circumstances and general confusion led Dunkelfelger not to take the show of interest seriously, but Lord Ortwin had not, in fact, pursued me because I was a divine avatar or a friend of Rozemyne.

The fact that he had worried so much about me last year meant he had truly cared for me for quite some time.

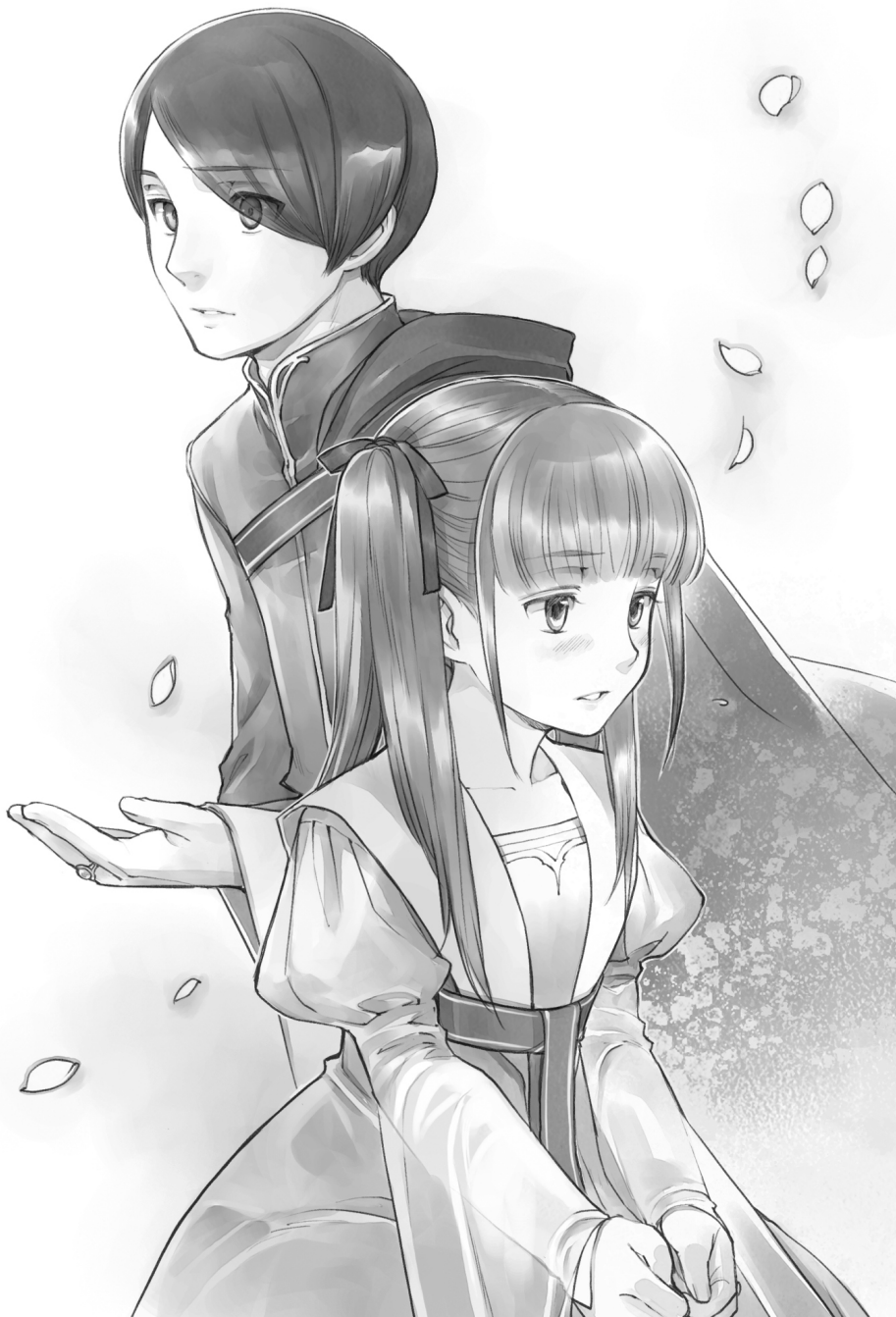
“If you still personally wish to leave Dunkelfelger, and you have not yet chosen an engagement candidate, then I still believe I have a chance. You are being tossed about by ditto conditions, placed in unfavorable circumstances, hailed as the second divine avatar, and pressured by Korinthsdaum. Only I can protect you. As I said before, even if you still find yourself drawn to Wilfried, I have the patience to wait for that to change.”

I could feel the Hannelore of last year being healed and comforted by his words. The me who had been isolated, without allies, and forced to stand alone was overjoyed.

“Drewanchel will not demand the usual traits of a

Dunkelfelgerian from you,” Lord Ortwin said. “I wish to use all the power at my disposal to protect you, the second divine avatar. If you are to take anyone’s hand, let it be mine.”

Lord Ortwin gently extended his hand. A year ago, I would have taken it without thinking. Now, I had no intention of accepting. I was grateful for his words, but things had changed. I wanted to regain the trust of my duchy, my parents, and my suitors; I couldn’t betray them and run away to Drewanchel.



“If you had come to me a year ago...” I said.

When I sealed off my path into Ehrenfest after bringing defeat upon my duchy...

When Ehrenfest refused my hand and I no longer knew where I could marry...

When my relationship with my retainers was strained...

Before I took part in true ditto and cleared my name...

Before I traveled to the past and realized how differently I had perceived things...

And most of all, before I learned the truth of my suitors' feelings for me...

“I would probably have taken your hand without a moment's hesitation,” I said. “However, far too much has changed in far too short a time.”

I had participated in true ditto and cleared my name, earning better treatment. The descent of the Goddess of Time had made me the second divine avatar. I had gone to the past and learned much, mending my relationships with my retainers. I had resolved my feelings toward Wilfried in my own way. And, above all, hearing Rasantark say that I was the perfect image of a Dunkelfelger archduke candidate had brought me far more joy than I ever could have expected. I no longer felt displeasure at the thought of remaining in Dunkelfelger.

“You could never have imagined so much would change in so little time—but the help you speak of now is no longer the help I want or need,” I concluded.

The expression that crossed Lord Ortwin's face as his eyes widened in shock reminded me of Lord Wilfried's when he rejected me. Now I understood what he had meant when he said things would have been different in the past.

I was truly grateful—overjoyed, even—that Lord Ortwin had loved me and wished to help me during my darkest, most miserable days. But I could not accept his feelings. The person he wished to save was the version of me from last year, not the one who stood before him now.

“The opportunity for our threads to be woven together has passed. Your timing was... poor.”

Lord Ortwin slowly curled his open hand into a fist. His other

hand closed over it, as though to steady its shaking. With his gaze lowered, fixed on his own knuckles, I could not see what face he was making.

A dull ache spread through my chest, and I clenched my own hands before my heart. It was not out of dislike that I refused him. As happy as his feelings made me, I could not accept them. My own clumsiness felt like a knife turning in my ribs.

After a long silence, Lord Ortwin let out a heavy sigh. He released his fist and lifted his head. His face was composed, bearing the serene, practiced smile of a noble.

“I see... That is unfortunate. Even so, might I still aid you in bride-stealing ditter? Could our duchies form an alliance, solidifying my role as the next Aub Drewanchel?” he asked, sounding every bit the archduke candidate.

In response, I gave him a bright smile of my own. “Indeed. I would very much like to fight alongside Drewanchel. Let us defeat Korinthsdaum together.”

We had only just finished drawing that line between us when break time came to an end.

Epilogue

The bell rang, and the professor announced the end of class. “Next time, we shall practice from different positions.”

“Your wisdom enriches us.”

After exchanging the usual farewells, some of the students made briskly for the door, while others took a moment to catch their breath. Whirling was arduous enough for those who weren’t used to regular exercise. Doing it once or twice was fine, but practicing again and again, having to tweak their performance to the professor’s expectations, was exhausting—especially now that the fifth-years’ roles were being seriously considered. No longer was it enough to simply watch the older students.

“Ortwin, what’s the plan for gewinnen this year?” Konradin asked, leaning his back against the wall. “We should start thinking about socializing with the lower grades.”

Konradin was an archduke candidate of Gaussbuttel. Gewinnen was far from a pressing concern; he had only brought it up so he could justify not moving. He found it hard enough to stay on his feet, let alone stumble to the door, and a young man of his status didn’t want to be seen panting and wheezing. By starting the conversation, he had tacitly requested a moment of rest.

Ortwin half smirked. His classmate’s lack of stamina wasn’t particularly surprising—Gaussbuttel was known more for gathering information than combat. Konradin himself was the son of a third wife, far removed from any wars of succession. He wasn’t even required to train to protect his foundation. Apparently, he avoided training with knights with the dubious excuse that his half-brothers would sleep easier knowing he had nothing in the way of physical strength. Yet his poor shape meant he always needed more time to catch his breath after practice.

“Should we speak with the younger archduke candidates next whirling lesson?” Ortwin asked.

“Yeah. Lord Hildebrand joined the Academy this year. The sooner we socialize with him, the better.”

Normally, Wilfried would have joined in on their conversation, but he had departed early at a summons from his sister Charlotte. Ortwin suspected she was keeping a close eye on him to ensure he didn't say anything else that might get Ehrenfest in trouble.

She and Aub Ehrenfest must be at their wits' end.

Wilfried had given Ehrenfest quite the shock with his pledge to support Ortwin in the upcoming ditler match. He had quickly been made to apologize, and Charlotte had insisted that Ehrenfest would not, in fact, assist Drewanchel due to an agreement it had already made with Dunkelfelger.

Ortwin himself had known nothing of his friend's intention to support him; Wilfried had mentioned it only to Hannelore when the two of them were using sound-blockers. Wilfried insisted he had spoken with good intentions, but it was still a shocking blunder for an archduke candidate. It had left Hannelore more on guard against Ortwin than ever, much to the latter's frustration.

"We sure have a lot of eyes on us, huh?" Konradin muttered. "Not that I don't know why."

Ortwin looked around just in time to catch the eyes of his Drewanchel half-siblings and several other students. They glanced his way as they left the hall.

"What did you say to Lady Hannelore during our break? She's been keeping her distance from her challengers, right? Dahvidh dropped out, but she's still holding him at arm's length. What was your plan, even?"

Hannelore was being watched closely now that she was the second divine avatar, and the upcoming ditler match had drawn even more attention to her. Drewanchel was one of the few duchies that hadn't withdrawn its challenge, so the fact Ortwin had approached her hadn't gone unnoticed.

"Nothing too important. I was there when the Goddess of Time descended into her; there are many things that could warrant my speaking to her."

"Right. Many things, huh?"

If they had used sound-blockers, then it had to be something important. Konradin and Ortwin grinned at each other, in unspoken agreement not to pursue the matter any further.

"I take it you have plans for the ditler match as well," Konradin said.

"I do look before I leap, you know," Ortwin replied, offering the

most composed smile he could muster. He raised a hand in farewell, turned on his heel, and started toward the door.

Konradin pushed himself off the wall and followed, having caught his breath. "Korinthsdaum's getting close," he said, his gaze fixed on Ortwin's half-brother, who was watching them carefully.

"I know, but thanks."

As soon as the boys stepped outside, their retainers hurried to their sides.

"You are late, Lord Konradin."

"Ortwin and I were arranging our plans for the younger students."

"Lord Ortwin, we thank you for accompanying our lord."

Konradin's retainers knew their lord wasn't the most athletic, and that Ortwin had intentionally stayed behind to cover for him. They expressed their gratitude as the two boys parted ways.

As soon as Ortwin arrived outside his room, his retainers set about checking the door and the interior for any nefarious magic tools. If someone were to plant one, it would surely be while his retainers were ferrying him to and from class. During that brief, predictable period, his room was all but guaranteed to be empty.

"Looks clear to me."

"Of course," Ortwin said. "Archduke candidates all leave for whirling practice at the same time."

"Still. Better safe than sorry."

At last, with his retainers' approval, Ortwin continued into his room. Drewanchel's war of succession had intensified to the extreme. Adolphine's divorce had cost Ortwin the security of being the brother of the king's first wife, and recent revelations that the current generation of schtappes was inferior and that offering prayer could improve one's divine protections had further fanned the flames of competition. Ortwin's superiority was no longer guaranteed, and his half-brother had started vying for the archducal seat.

"Did you approach Lady Hannelore in class today?" asked Ortwin's head attendant, Berlucort. Ortwin had told his retainers of his plan to speak with her, so they were naturally curious.

Ortwin nodded and took a seat at his table. "That's what I want to talk about."

The apprentice scholars sat down with him, while the

apprentice attendants went to prepare tea, keeping within earshot. The apprentice knights split into two groups: those who would operate the area-wide sound-blocker, and those who would stand guard in front of the door. Ortwin reflected on Hannelore's words in the meantime.

"If you had come to me a year ago, I would probably have taken your hand without a moment's hesitation. However, far too much has changed in far too short a time."

A year ago, hmm...?

Ortwin had first met Hannelore during their first year at the Royal Academy, when they greeted each other for the fellowship gathering. Back then, Hannelore had stood a step behind her brother, as if hoping his cape would hide her from view. She had spent so much of her time staring at her feet that Ortwin had barely caught a good look at her face.

Yet he still remembered how cute she had sounded when she gave her permission for a blessing.

Later, during their court etiquette class, Ortwin first became genuinely aware of Hannelore as a person. Seeing her anxiously look around, fidgeting to no end, had made him want to reach out to support her—to assure her she was doing well and that she should be more confident in herself. He had led the conversation to draw attention away from her nervousness, only for their professor to criticize him for not letting anyone else get a word in edgewise. Even in retrospect, it sparked a small pang of bitterness.

"It shocked me how little she resembled the Dunkelfelger archduke candidates you warned me about," Ortwin said. "In stark contrast to my elder sister, who exudes authority at all times, she had something about her that made me want to rush to her aid."

"Oh? Do you fancy her, Lord Ortwin?" Berlucort asked.

Ortwin gave a wry smile and shook his head. "As adorable as she is, I must be wary of befriending her."

"Well put. As things stand, Lady Eglantine is sure to marry the first prince, while Lady Adolphine will marry the second. Lady Hannelore, an archduke candidate of Dunkelfelger, would doubtless prioritize connections with the former."

"Indeed. If my sister marries the second prince, it would not be wise for me to form ties with Dunkelfelger. I understand that much. Let me say this again, however—no matter how many times my

sister asks it of me, I have no intention of becoming the next Aub Drewanchel.”

As a first-year student, Ortwin found research far more enjoyable, and he didn’t want to be dragged around by his sister for the rest of his life. Even so, if he were to marry Hannelore, the daughter of Dunkelfelger’s first wife, it would effectively fix him as his duchy’s next archduke.

The best thing I can do is keep her out of mind.

However, halfway through the usual socializing period, when everyone was turning their attention to preparing for the Interduchy Tournament, the country’s expectations were abruptly turned on their head.

“Goodness gracious,” Berlucort said. “I never thought Lady Eglantine would choose the *second* prince as her groom.”

Ortwin grimaced. “On top of that, the throne is still going to Prince Sigiswald. My sister’s going to be the first wife of Yurgenschmidt’s next king. Neither she nor Drewanchel is ready for that.”

Once the princes’ fiancées were formally announced at the Archduke Conference, there were significant shifts in interduchy relations and in the balance of power among the duchy’s factions. Dealings with the Sovereignty increased, and tensions in Drewanchel never seemed to ease, even as the seasons changed. Before he knew it, Ortwin was in his second year at the Academy.

“Berlucort, my sister seems to be having a very hard time of late...” he said.

“Prince Sigiswald is entirely inconsiderate, to say nothing of the curt remarks and attitude of those still enrolled at the Academy.” Many students of other duchies wished to speak with Adolphine about her engagement to the first prince, and they constantly compared her talent and treatment to Eglantine’s.

“Adolphine predicted this last year and said she wasn’t looking forward to it, but I never imagined things would get this bad. I’ve never seen my ever-confident sister this worn down before. It won’t be long before others notice as well.”

“Indeed. There is a limit to how much one can hide.”

“Is there nothing more I can do? I promised to help her as much as I could.”

As exhausted as Adolphine seemed, her engagement couldn’t simply be canceled. She was at her limit merely putting on a noble

smile, and while Ortwin wanted to help her, he couldn't think of a single thing he could do.

"She will need a support base mighty enough to stand against Klassenberg," Berlucoart said. "Perhaps you should deepen your bond with Lady Hannelore."

"Lady Hannelore? I see..."

When Adolphine had been expected to marry the second prince, few would have supported Ortwin pursuing Lady Hannelore. Now, with how much things had changed, people would celebrate it.

"Though you will need to become the next Aub Drewanchel, a fate you so deeply detested..."

"Hearing that from you, of all people, makes my gut wrench. I'll think it over carefully. To be honest, my hands are full enough already with all the duchies approaching me for personal gain."

In a stroke of good fortune, Adolphine's situation improved without Ortwin having to do anything. She was given an Ehrenfest hairpin during a tea party—a clear sign of the first prince's consideration that left others unable to openly criticize her. But that peace fell away when vestiges of the losing duchies revolted during the Interduchy Tournament.

"Will their hatred be aimed at my sister now?"

"Lady Adolphine is about to join the royal family. She might not have been royalty during the civil war, but that won't matter to those viewing her with scorn."

"More now than ever, we need Dunkelfelger's might as the Zent's sword."

"Indeed. If you marry Lady Hannelore, we will gain a powerful ally. And there is no better way you can support Lady Adolphine than by becoming the next Aub Drewanchel."

Ortwin had once thought his sister invincible. Now he saw her brought to her knees, the risk of becoming royalty hanging over her like an axe above the chopping block. He was no longer a child who could refuse to become the next aub simply to spite her wishes. With all that had happened, he understood what was expected of him as her brother.

"Considering how much attention you have devoted to Lady Hannelore, it would be best to make your decision sooner rather than later," Berlucoart said.

"Not so loud."

"If I can offer one last piece of advice—you will need to get

closer to Lady Hannelore for the aubs to consider an engagement. And if you truly do intend to propose, you should wait until you have developed mana-sensing.”

Proposing before developing mana-sensing was certainly an option. In such cases, the engagement would effectively be a reservation, valid only if their mana turned out to match. However, if Ortwin proposed without having had any real interaction with Hannelore, she would naturally assume that he was interested in her only for political reasons. And if she received multiple offers, it was likely that, after mana-sensing, priority would go to whoever had the most mana. Since he spent his days merely watching her from afar, he had no choice but to agree that he needed to actually speak with her before proposing.

But I might not develop mana-sensing until next year—or the year after that.

Suddenly, Ortwin’s third year at the Royal Academy seemed tragically far away. He developed mana-sensing before the start of the academic term, but who knew how long it might be before Hannelore developed it as well. He strove to interact with her as much as he could, sowing the seeds for the day he would propose, but the fact they had branched into their specialty courses left him with fewer chances than expected—especially when Hannelore was devoting her time to her joint research with Ehrenfest.

Joint research often benefited both duchies involved. It also often blossomed into engagements between archduke candidates—which might have worried Ortwin if Wilfried and Rozemyne weren’t already engaged. Ehrenfest posed no threat to him.

Or so he thought.

“Ehrenfest and Dunkelfelger played bride-taking ditter?” Ortwin repeated. “But Lady Rozemyne and Lord Wilfried are already engaged!”

He reeled at his sister’s report on the Sovereign knights. It was the last thing he had expected. Bride-taking ditter was held when two people mutually in love couldn’t secure their parents’ approval to get engaged—and apparently, if Ehrenfest won, Hannelore would marry Wilfried.

“Were Lord Wilfried and Lady Hannelore in love...?” Berlucoart asked.

“I watched them more closely than pretty much anyone, yet I sensed nothing of the sort. I pray my sister is mistaken, but she

would never make a claim without proof.”

The days that followed seemed to prove her right. Hannelore and Wilfried were definitely closer. Perhaps they were cautious of prying eyes, since they weren’t formally engaged yet, but someone who knew the circumstances could tell she was looking at him differently.

“I’ll need to give up on Lady Hannelore, then,” Ortwin sighed. “An engagement decided through ditte won’t ever be overturned. It’ll be formally announced at the next Archduke Conference, without a doubt.”

“In that case, you will need to search elsewhere for a suitable partner if you wish to be the next aub,” Berluco said. Then, in a lower voice, he added, “As it stands... Lady Adolphine’s position is all too fragile.”

Sigiswald had just fathered a son. Such sensitive information about the royal family would normally be impossible to come by, but nobles of Drewanchel had been frequenting the prince’s villa to prepare Adolphine’s room.

“My sister’s Starbinding will surely be postponed, to all manner of scathing criticism.”

Yet, contrary to their expectations, the ceremony was not delayed. It was held at the Archduke Conference, entirely to plan.

Ortwin was too young to attend the ceremony, so his knowledge of it came entirely from reports. They described the yearly business done with other duchies, changes to the duchy rankings, the royal family’s promises about Adolphine’s wedding, the recreation of an ancient ceremony that Rozemyne had performed, and means of increasing one’s divine protections...

Yet there was no mention of Hannelore’s engagement.

Perhaps there was no helping it; an engagement between Ehrenfest and Dunkelfelger was hardly of much importance to Drewanchel. Ortwin himself paid it barely any mind—partly because there was so much else to focus on, but also because it wasn’t news he particularly wanted to hear. Thus, it wasn’t until Ortwin entered his fourth year at the Royal Academy that he learned the engagement had never come to pass.

“Did... Wilfried refuse it?” he wondered aloud. “Even though he played ditte for her?”

Ortwin confirmed that the ditte match had indeed taken place, then turned to Wilfried for an explanation.

“Well, Lord Lestilaut issued the challenge in the first place in an attempt to marry Rozemyne. Hannelore and I were just kind of dragged into it. We discussed the matter during last year’s Interduchy Tournament and resolved it all amicably.”

Amicably for you, maybe, but what about for Hannelore?

Ortwin resisted the urge to put his head in his hands. From what he could tell, there was now a deep chasm between Hannelore and her retainers. She spent so much of her time staring at her feet when moving from class to class that Ortwin could only assume things were going poorly for her.

“If you’re that worried, why not heroically step forth and rescue her?” Berluport asked. “A woman’s heart is most receptive when she’s anxious and uneasy.”

“It can’t be that simple,” Ortwin protested. “Anytime I speak to her, she’s got her head in the clouds. Her eyes and mind are fixed on Wilfried at all times.”

“She chose Ehrenfest over her own father’s wishes,” Berluport noted, sidestepping the issue with a smile. “If you can win her heart, she will surely embrace Drewanchel as well.”

“I cannot act without Father’s approval, and I already told him he could choose my engagement partners for me, since I assumed Lady Hannelore was taken. Even if I win her over, it could cause all manner of problems if he’s made other plans for me.”

The aub’s will took the highest priority when it came to engagements between archduke candidates. Even normal engagements required his approval. Laying the proper groundwork was more important than anything else. Yet when Ortwin sought his permission...

“Securing her hand will not be easy. One of the princes will surely want her as a second wife. If you are set on her, come top of your class. Do that, and I will raise the idea with Dunkelfelger.”

Ortwin was overcome with despair. Every single year since his enrollment at the Academy, Rozemyne had come first-in-class. Despite her young age, she had an uncanny intellect that had put her in a position of educating archdukes and even royalty about the benefits of religious ceremonies. Ortwin stood no chance against her.

Still, I must try. My hands are tied.

In the end, Ortwin came top of his class—but only because Rozemyne’s poor health saw her absent for almost the entire

academic year. It wasn't the most honorable victory, but it was enough to appease his father.

As the next Archduke Conference drew near, soldiers from Lanzenave invaded the Sovereignty, and a portion of the Sovereign Knight's Order turned coat. Country gates were activated, Dunkelfelger mobilized to fight, and events that beggared belief seemed to happen one after another. Adolphine used the chaos to secure a divorce and return to Drewanchel.

Ortwin soon learned from his sister that their father had proposed marrying him to Zent Eglantine or Rozemyne, the divine avatar—as a second husband, in both cases. In the same breath, she instructed him to marry Hannelore and strive to become the next Aub Drewanchel.

At first, Ortwin assumed she was just being snide—that she was teasing him for having asked their father to look into an engagement with Hannelore in the first place. But as it turned out, their father had never broached the matter to begin with, and Adolphine had simply hoped to warn her brother of his unstable position. Ortwin was both touched by his sister's consideration and appalled that their father had gone against his word.

"Father, why did you push for me to marry Zent Eglantine or Lady Rozemyne?" Ortwin asked during the inevitable confrontation. "You promised to work toward setting me up with Lady Hannelore."

"Adolphine and Lord Sigiswald have separated," his father replied. "How could I not prioritize ties to the new great powers?"

"But... without even consulting me?"

"The discussion with the royal family came abruptly. The Zent asked what would benefit Drewanchel, and I grasped at Anhaltung's hem—that is all. If they refuse me on both counts, I will approach Dunkelfelger at the Archduke Conference. Now spare me your complaints."

Though his father had made the right choice for an aub, Ortwin doubted the rest of the country would interpret it so generously. Word of the archduke's request inevitably reached Dunkelfelger, so when he proposed marriage between his son and Lady Hannelore, they refused him on the spot, insisting it was both improper and insincere.

You have the wrong idea! I never asked for this!

Ortwin could have burst into tears. Not only had his feelings

never reached Hannelore, but now she must have thought he was desperate for power. The change in her reputation couldn't have helped; she had gone from being a victim of ditter in dire need of rescue to a well-known friend of the divine avatar.

If nothing else, I hope to make her understand that I sought her hand for more than just political reasons.

While his duchy was in an uproar over Adolphine's divorce, intent on finding her a new husband to make her a giebe, Ortwin devoted himself to making a courtship magic tool for Hannelore. By the time he reached his fifth year at the Royal Academy, he learned that she now had two suitors chosen by her father. Perhaps the decision had only been made recently, for her eyes still wandered not to either of them, but to Wilfried.

They're mere suitors. No engagement has been set in stone. I still have a chance, slim though it might be.

Ortwin strove to get closer to Hannelore, but he never succeeded. In the end, she drove a wedge between them once and for all.

"The opportunity for our threads to be woven together has passed. Your timing was... poor."

She was right—despite his best efforts, he had always been one step behind. After five years spent running in circles, Ortwin was overcome with a sense of profound defeat.

"Everything is ready, Lord Ortwin," Berlucort said.

Ortwin looked over his gathered retainers, then curtly broke the news: Hannelore had rejected him.

"Things were going well until the goddess's descent," his head attendant mused.

"Indeed," Ortwin replied. "I felt Lady Hannelore's heart waver, and she responded well to my words. However, the goddess's arrival changed everything about her and her circumstances."

Against her wishes, Hannelore had gained widespread recognition as the country's second divine avatar. No longer able to act based on love, she had chosen to stay in Dunkelfelger instead of marrying into the political chaos that now swirled around her.

But what surprised Ortwin most of all were the changes to her character. He had come to know Hannelore as emotionally unstable, her expression always one of unease. Since the goddess's descent, however, she had carried herself exactly as an archduke

candidate of Dunkelfelger should, even prioritizing the suitors chosen by her father over archduke candidates of other duchies. Her decision to stay in Dunkelfelger and the fact she no longer acted purely on her own emotions had caught Ortwin thoroughly off guard.

“She changed too much, too quickly,” he said. “The help I could give her, she no longer wanted or needed.”

Ortwin’s retainers, who had done all they could to help their lord, grimaced as if his pain were theirs.

“The plans I devised—and expected her to accept—were all rejected,” Ortwin concluded. “She would not trust her thread to me, for there was nothing I could offer her.”

He let out a small sigh, keenly aware of his own inadequacies. In what world would Hannelore have accepted him, knowing he lacked the means to even know what she desired, let alone provide it. There was nothing he could do. Striving for her hand any longer would be pointless.

“Are you well, Lord Ortwin?” Berluccort asked, his brow furrowed in concern.

Ortwin blinked, unsure what his head attendant meant. “Of course. Though I worry how Lady Hannelore will survive in Dunkelfelger when she has spent her whole life trying to reject it.”

“It concerns me how composed you seem, despite having been rejected,” Berluccort said, his voice somewhat stern.

Ortwin paused, searching his heart for how he truly felt about the situation. The girl whom he had pined for since his first year had refused him. He had expected the blow to bring him to his knees, yet instead he felt... nothing. It was as though his heart were shrouded in fog.

“Ah, well... I do feel a bit numb, as if the pain has yet to register. It’s as though a thread were cut before me, and the most I can do is stare.”

“Then the wound is still too fresh,” Berluccort said with anguish.

Ortwin nodded. The pain would surely come later, when Hannelore chose the man she would spend the rest of her life with, or when Drewanchel’s battle of succession came to an end.

“I failed to convince Lady Hannelore to take my hand,” he breathed. “Still, I reinforced our cooperation with her in the upcoming dinner match. That is victory enough for a potential next step. Going forward, I want you all to focus on what I must do to

secure the archducal seat.”

Putting aside his inscrutable feelings for Hannelore, Ortwin opted to throw himself into becoming the next Aub Drewanchel. His retainers’ expressions hardened as they took turns weighing in.

“Indeed, it was a wise move to reinforce our agreement. Cooperating with Lady Hannelore—and receiving Aub Dunkelfelger’s support in turn—is critically important.”

“Should we not rein in Korinthsdaum next? They seem to be reaching into everything lately.”

“While practicing music for the dedication whirl, I heard that Lord Raufereg lost a dormitory ditter match and was ordered to return to Dunkelfelger. That should put an end to at least one of Korinthsdaum’s plans.”

Korinthsdaum had doubtless hoped to sow conflict in Dunkelfelger by instigating its most reckless archduke candidate. Raufereg had been eliminated in short order, but he was far from the former prince’s only machination.

“They’ve been contacting us as well,” Ortwin said. “Any further reports?” Just as Sigiswald had instigated Raufereg, he had also been reaching out to Ortwin’s half-siblings, hoping to weaken Drewanchel by offering to support their becoming the next aub.

Truly, this is his one area of expertise.

He had proven as much several times over, circulating malicious rumors about Adolphine, minimizing his flaws, and using his authority as former royalty to manipulate public opinion. He maintained a calm and peaceful demeanor, acting helpful when he was really looking out for himself.

In the long term, Sigiswald retaining his influence as former royalty would be troublesome, given his tendency to cause friction and worsen schisms to strengthen his own support base. Ortwin was all too aware of the man’s stance on Drewanchel, the duchy that was not only refusing to support his new territory but also pressuring him for reparations.

If, with the former prince’s aid, Ortwin’s half-brother became the next Aub Drewanchel, Adolphine would be lambasted for her divorce and eventually stripped of both her province and her status as a giebe. Korinthsdaum would then tighten its hold on the duchy, slowly but surely squeezing it dry.

Because he knew what Sigiswald was capable of—thanks in part to his sister’s insights—Ortwin intended to use the bride-

stealing dinner match to reduce Korinthsdaum's influence as much as possible. He had even secured Aub Dunkelfelger's permission. Now, his top priority was thwarting Korinthsdaum's plans and his half-brother's ambitions.

"Have we identified which Korinthsdaum students have approached my half-siblings?" Ortwin asked.

"We have, and our efforts should soon bear fruit," one of his retainers answered. They had already set about finding Korinthsdaum students with parents from Drewanchel who were willing to leak intelligence.

"If we are going to act against Korinthsdaum, we should first confirm where Blumenfeld stands," another retainer noted. "Did anyone interact with its students during today's classes?"

Ortwin had intended to approach Hildebrand, an archduke candidate of Blumenfeld, during class to invite him to a tea party. Unfortunately, he could only shake his head in response.

"Aub Blumenfeld has strictly forbidden his students from interacting with duchies that would oppose Dunkelfelger in the upcoming dinner match," he said. "Despite being an archduke candidate, I was asked to wait until after its conclusion to connect with him."

Dunkelfelger and Drewanchel were going to fight together, but only Ortwin, his retainers, and the archducal couple knew that. It was a crucial move that, if executed successfully, would all but guarantee his becoming the next aub. If his half-siblings found out, they would almost certainly interfere, which was why he had signed a magic contract with his retainers and parents requiring utmost secrecy. Naturally, he couldn't tell Hildebrand about his plans either.

"I can't say I'm surprised," Ortwin said. "Blumenfeld has Lady Magdalena for a first wife, after all."

"Oh?" Berlucort looked at him curiously. "Will they be keeping their distance from Korinthsdaum as well, then?"

Ortwin didn't know what kind of relationship Blumenfeld had with Korinthsdaum behind the scenes, but they wouldn't openly oppose Dunkelfelger. Of that, he could be certain.

"Still, if that is Blumenfeld's stance, will it not also be more difficult to socialize with Lady Letizia of Alexandria?" Berlucort asked.

Ortwin threw his hands up in defeat. On that front, there was

nothing they could do. He wanted to ask her about Alexandria, but he couldn't find a chance. Letizia had been adopted into Ahrensbach from Drewanchel, and her biological elder brother was Ortwin's adopted half-brother, who would most certainly try to keep them apart.

Then there was the other obstacle—the reason Blumenfeld's reticence was such an issue. Without Hildebrand, Ortwin couldn't invite Letizia to a tea party. Meeting her without her partner would give rise to all manner of misconceptions.

"We hoped to speak with Lady Letizia directly, since there are still conflicting views in and around Old Ahrensbach and the aub," Berluco said. "But it seems any information we hope to obtain about Alexandria will need to reach us through Ehrenfest."

"And with how carefully Lady Charlotte is watching Wilfried, even that might be too much to expect."

Ortwin massaged his temples. Even throughout whirling practice, Charlotte had kept a close eye on her brother. Ehrenfest would surely take great care to ensure Wilfried couldn't socialize with Drewanchel before the ditter match.

"Thinking about it, Korinthsdaum might have intentionally misled Lord Wilfried to further reduce our options for gathering information," one apprentice scholar said, tone harsh with regret. "I see no other reason he would suddenly oppose Dunkelfelger."

"Keep your unfounded suspicions to yourself," Ortwin said, waving the idea away. He was as suspicious of Korinthsdaum as anyone, but speculating would get them nowhere.

Berluco sighed. "I did warn you that if you prioritized your research over socializing, insistent as you were that you could always learn about Ehrenfest from Lord Wilfried, it would eventually come back to bite you."

"And you were right. I understand that well enough, so spare me the lecture." Ortwin turned to his apprentice scholars. "On a more productive note, how are Hauchletzte and Gilessenmeyer?"

"They are working rather closely with Korinthsdaum," one noted. "Both Hauchletzte's and Gilessenmeyer's archduke candidates have been seen visiting Korinthsdaum's tea party room with increasing frequency—and with tense looks on their faces."

Berluco raised an eyebrow and turned to Ortwin, who responded with a nod. Korinthsdaum's lack of archduke candidates made it particularly strange for archduke candidates of other

duchies to look uncomfortable before their meetings.

“Lord Sigiswald must be visiting the Royal Academy.”

Adults were generally forbidden from involving themselves in matters of the Academy, but archducal family members still sometimes visited their respective dormitories. Their presence was occasionally necessary to resolve problems too severe for students or dormitory supervisors, or when students messed up gravely enough for their aub to have to apologize. Sigiswald was an archduke, meaning he could silence any complaints by saying there had been a problem in his duchy’s dormitory that demanded his attention.

“I trust he was tightening his hold on Hauchletzte and Gilessenmeyer, not wanting to lose more military might after the Zent sent the lesser and middle duchies running...” an apprentice said.

“They’re of greater value to him now that more and more duchies are backing out, too scared to take on Dunkelfelger’s military.”

Hauchletzte and Gilessenmeyer might not have been military superpowers, but they had spent years enjoying the comforts of the royal family’s support. Compared to the greater duchies forced to manage deposed duchies and part with their talented citizens, they had found themselves fairly unburdened. The strength of their forces wasn’t to be underestimated.

“Oh, speaking of cooperators,” Berlucort said, “a message from Lady Adolphine arrived.”

“From my sister?” Ortwin asked.

Berlucort held out the board, and Ortwin pulled a face like he’d just eaten something bitter. As his elder sister of the same mother, Adolphine had unwelcomely weighed in on his actions since he was young.

“She’s no cooperator,” Ortwin muttered, accepting the board with a frown. “This feels awfully ominous.”

His retainers said nothing, merely watching sympathetically. They, too, had experienced Adolphine at her most overbearing.

“I am told Lord Sigiswald means to participate in the upcoming battle. As I am no longer of the archducal family, there is not much I can do, but I shall permit you to take my former guard knights into your employ until the match. You might also care to know that, as it seemed such a shame to squander their talents, I am having the scholars you left

in the castle work on a new offensive magic tool. It is improving by the day. Promise to unleash it on Lord Sigiswald for me."

As much as Ortwin appreciated his sister's enthusiasm, he found her closing demand really quite unsettling.

"I understand my sister's position, but she's far too bloodthirsty. Oderkunst really shouldn't give her free rein of the castle."

Ortwin sighed, then passed the board around for his retainers to read. Immediately, they started cackling among themselves. Some asked whether the message was too impolite, while others insisted that Lord Sigiswald had accepted the risk when he agreed to join the ditter match in the first place.

"Um, Lord Ortwin... That isn't all," one of his retainers said, then turned the board over for him. In the bottom corner—a spot that would have been covered when the knight who inspected the board picked it up—was another, much smaller message.

"I wonder if, in the depths of winter, I could coax a hearth's flame into a radiant sun."

It was said that Geduldh the Goddess of Earth drew her color from the flame of a hearth, and the God of Life's one-sided obsession with her had made her into something of a symbol for unrequited affection. If the sun symbolized the Goddess of Light—a title often bestowed upon one's first wife...

Ortwin could only grimace. He could almost hear Adolphine saying, "It will surely be impossible for you to turn your unrequited love into something mutual and marry Hannelore while attending the Royal Academy."

"Messer."

Ortwin turned his schtappe into a knife, then crudely hacked away his sister's upsetting message. Hannelore had rejected him without question, leaving not even the slightest bit of room for hope. He repeated to himself that he couldn't allow his emotions to sway him—that he had to do whatever would benefit Drewanchel most.

"I could have done without that last part, but I welcome her assistance nonetheless," Ortwin said. "Though I can't promise to unleash her magic tool on Lord Sigiswald, I *will* become our duchy's next aub. I ask for your support, everyone."

An Error and an Interrogation

“Lady Charlotte, I come with an urgent letter from Lady Hannelore. Lady Elusia of Dunkelfelger has asked that you read it posthaste.”

I was studying in my room when my attendant Ediline arrived with a message for me. Instead of an invitation written on a board for anyone to see, it was purposefully sealed inside an envelope.

“Goodness. From Lady Hannelore? What in the world could have happened?” I cocked my head, entirely unsure why she might have suddenly contacted me. “Wilfried didn’t say anything at lunch, did he?”

“Not to my knowledge.”

I had been studying with my apprentice scholar Marianne and my head attendant, Vanessa, and they both nodded in turn. Lady Hannelore had been unconscious since the Goddess of Time descended into her, but Wilfried said she had returned to class today. I was concerned both about her and about the fact that my sister still hadn’t returned from wherever the goddess had taken her, so I had intended to arrange a tea party with Lady Hannelore at some point—but I certainly hadn’t been expecting a letter from her.

“How concerning...” I muttered. “Our interactions with Dunkelfelger have mostly been through Wilfried and Rozemyne, since they are in Lady Hannelore’s year. Why would she send a letter to me, not my brother?”

Until last year, I had attended tea parties with her while Rozemyne was in Ehrenfest, but only in a supporting capacity. Brunhilde and Lieseleta did most of the talking. When it came to Ehrenfest’s interduchy relations, Rozemyne handled the royal family and the top-ranking duchies, Wilfried handled the male archduke candidates, and I handled the lower- and middle-ranking duchies.

My sister planned to introduce me to the top-ranking duchies this year, and yet...

She had not returned from the Goddess of Time's invitation.

In my sister's absence, I always felt the enormity of the void she left behind. I had come far enough that I could get by without making any serious errors, but I could never prove my worth to the top-ranking duchies in a single tea party. The speed with which she made herself needed astounded me, yet I knew from experience that it was unwise to attempt to mimic her.

"I have some experience socializing with top-ranking duchies, thanks to Lady Brunhilde, but..." Ediline's eyes flitted toward the door. "I feel a bit uneasy, so perhaps we should summon Lady Bertilde and Lady Philine before opening the letter?"

Already, I had made a mistake. I hadn't even opened the letter, yet I had worried my second-year retainer. I gave her the best smile I could muster.

"Lady Hannelore went to the trouble of sealing it; I should read it myself before I consider sharing its contents with anyone else. Not to mention, with my sister in the world of the gods, Bertilde and the others have enough on their plate already. My sister is now Aub Alexandria; we knew I would need to exchange letters with top-ranking duchies eventually."

In truth, I spoke as much for my own sake as for hers. I turned to Vanessa, accepted the letter opener she had prepared, and cut into the envelope. But when I finally read its contents...

"What...?"

The blood drained from my face. In her letter, Lady Hannelore explained that Wilfried had announced his intention to support Lord Ortwin in the upcoming ditter match, and that she was writing to confirm Ehrenfest's stance on the matter.

Brother... what in the world were you thinking?!

I could only assume Lord Ortwin had asked him for help, and he had agreed without considering the political repercussions.

"Lady Charlotte? Is everything okay?" Vanessa asked, peering at me with worry. "May I read the letter too?"

I read it again to confirm its message, then handed it over. Though it was crucial that we keep this information from other duchies, I needed to share it with my retainers, at least. How else would they be able to aid me in fixing it?

Vanessa's face grew paler and paler the more she read. Given the letter's contents, I wasn't too surprised.

"For now, do not speak of this to anyone outside my retinue," I

said, taking the letter from Vanessa and passing it to Marianne.

“Lady Charlotte...” Marianne said, equally as shaken by Lady Hannelore’s news, “this is the first I’m hearing of Ehrenfest helping Drewanchel in the upcoming ditler match...”

“Come again? Drewanchel?!” Ediline yelled, turning to me for confirmation. “I thought Ehrenfest agreed not to get involved!”

“Indeed, and that hasn’t changed,” I said. “I don’t know what compelled my brother to claim otherwise, but I assure you he’s mistaken. It was a careless blunder on his part, spoken without regard for the consequences.”

It wouldn’t be the first time Wilfried had spoken without considering how it might affect other people, or prioritized his own emotions above all else. Besides, Drewanchel was the duchy of knowledge—they had a talent for manipulating others, and my brother was so trusting that I suspected he had gone along with whatever they told him. I wished to consult him at once, but he was in class.

“But turning against Dunkelfelger...” Vanessa muttered. “That’s more than a mere slip of the tongue.”

“Indeed... If only I could turn to my sister for help.”

Rozemyne was good friends with Lady Hannelore, which made her the perfect intermediary. But she was absent, and no amount of pleading would bring her back.

“I wish to send Lady Hannelore an ordonnanz explaining the situation and apologizing for my brother’s actions,” I said. “But if Wilfried is currently in class, she must be too.”

“Perhaps we could ask Lady Rozemyne’s retainers to consult her about meeting with us after class,” Marianne proposed—but Vanessa instantly rejected the idea.

“Under these circumstances, a tea party would hardly be a cheerful occasion. And since Lady Hannelore is asking about Ehrenfest’s intentions, a private apology would not suffice. No matter how well Lady Brunhilde might have trained them, this would be too great a burden for a second-year student like Lady Bertilde or a laynoble like Lady Philine.”

“And with my brother to blame... Well, I would feel uncomfortable asking Bertilde, of all people, to help clean up one of his messes,” I said.

In her eyes, Wilfried is an archduke candidate “ignorant of the nuances of faction politics and incapable of controlling his emotions.”

Bertilde had previously served my elder sister as an apprentice archattendant. She was also the younger sister of the woman soon to be Father's second wife. She had only ever seen Wilfried be hostile to Brunhilde and oppose her engagement, so of course she held him in contempt. She regarded him with cold eyes and tried to avoid him as often as she could.

"But if we don't consult Lady Bertilde, what am I to do?" Ediline asked, having never had to socialize with top-ranking duchies as an apprentice archattendant. She had gone white as a sheet, and I couldn't blame her—nobody had expected a situation in which Dunkelfelger would see Ehrenfest as a potential enemy.

"Let us remain calm, Ediline," I said. "As the letter says, Wilfried and Lady Hannelore were using sound-blockers. It is not as though the whole country knows of his mistake. If we apologize promptly, we should be able to prevent this from escalating into open hostility."

As bad as it was that my brother had tried to form an impromptu alliance with Drewanchel, the matter was still relatively contained. I could only assume Lady Hannelore had written to us precisely because a fight between our duchies so soon after the Defense of Ehrenfest would be as bad for her as it would for us.

"First things first—Marianne, write a copy of Lady Hannelore's letter. I shall keep it for myself and send the original to Father. I must inform him of my brother's blunder and the risk that Drewanchel might be manipulating him, so that he can help us in apologizing. We need a formal letter from him stating that Wilfried does not speak for Ehrenfest and that we do not, under any circumstances, intend to join the fight with Drewanchel. Vanessa, when Marianne is done, take the original correspondence home to Ehrenfest; I do not want even the knights at the teleportation hall to know about this."

"Understood," Vanessa said, springing into action. "I shall send an urgent request for a meeting."

"I permit you to bring my other retainers up to speed once they return from their classes, but nobody else must know of this. Furthermore, until we have solidified our position on this matter, avoid all contact with Dunkelfelger. We mustn't get ahead of ourselves and earn further ire, or worsen the tension between our duchies."

Vanessa left for Ehrenfest to relay Lady Hannelore's letter. She returned just as the afternoon's classes were coming to an end and gave me a board that I took for Father's response. I read it without delay.

"As Aub Ehrenfest, I hereby order Charlotte to do the following in her capacity as the next aub: Interrogate Wilfried about his connection to Drewanchel, then send an ordonnanz of apology to Lady Hannelore. Inform her that, as we speak, I am writing a formal letter of apology to Dunkelfelger."

Normally, it would have fallen to Wilfried, the source of this catastrophe, to apologize. For Father to have entrusted the duty to me instead, he must have feared that Wilfried would only make things worse, since he had clearly meant no harm and probably didn't understand what he'd done wrong to begin with.

"Not only was Lady Hannelore's letter addressed to me, but Father has now instructed me, as the next aub, to apologize in my brother's stead," I announced. "Once I have finished interrogating Wilfried, I will send Lady Hannelore an ordonnanz. I will also send my brother back to Ehrenfest, at the aub's request."

"Aub Ehrenfest went blue in the face when he read the letter," Vanessa said. "It would be too dangerous to keep Lord Wilfried at the Royal Academy when he does not understand the weight of his declaration, or the fact that he has strained our relationship with the country's top-ranking duchy. The aub will not mince his words, I'm sure."

She heaved an exhausted sigh, but our troubles were far from over. The others would soon return from their classes.

"Ediline, prepare a meeting room," I said. "Vanessa, contact my brother's retainers. When he returns, tell them we have urgent matters to discuss and orders from the aub. I ask that you reveal only the bare minimum."

"Understood."

I didn't have to wait long before my brother came back from his classes. He entered the meeting room with his retainers who had greeted him on his return.

"What's the big idea, asking me to come to a meeting room the moment I get back?" Wilfried asked, unconcerned with anything beyond the inconvenience of being summoned. "We might be siblings, but you should give me some notice, at least."

My retainers and I were pale, our expressions stern, but my brother and his retainers only looked around uncertainly. They truly had no idea what he'd done wrong.

"Brother, I received a letter from Lady Hannelore just after this afternoon's classes began," I said. "Could you explain what you said to her? Why would you side against Dunkelfelger and sow discord between our duchy and theirs, especially so soon after they helped us defend Ehrenfest?"

"A letter from Lady Hannelore? Discord between our duchies? What are you talking about?"

Marianne handed him our copy of the letter. His brow knit tighter with each line he read, yet he didn't blanch the way my retainers had.

"I told her I'd support Ortwin as his friend," he finally said. "She was smiling when I said it. How does that constitute an interduchy incident?"

Reflexively, I placed a hand on my forehead. It was bad enough that he had made such a grave mistake, but to have done it without a single thought for the consequences? I slowly looked over him and his retainers.

"So you admit that, as the letter says, you told Lady Hannelore you would give Lord Ortwin your full support in the bride-stealing ditler match? She did not mishear you?"

"That's right," Wilfried replied, nodding confidently. Some of his retainers recoiled at the news, while others frowned in confusion.

"How could that *not* constitute an interduchy incident?" I asked. "What 'support' do you intend to give? And what promise must you have made with Lord Ortwin to have agreed to assist him in the first place?"

"What do you mean? I'm just supporting him, like I said."

In other words, Wilfried had not only failed to consider the consequences of his statement, but also what it meant to begin with. I began to suspect he had pledged his full support to Lord Ortwin without even consulting him, which would be disastrous for Ehrenfest.

I looked at my brother and resisted the urge to sigh. "The upcoming match is a contest between duchies to decide who gets Lady Hannelore's hand. The moment you back one side, you make an enemy of the others. So why would you tell Lady Hannelore that

you intend to support Drewanchel—that, by extension, you intend to fight Dunkelfelger?”

“I didn’t! I mean, that wasn’t my...! Of course I don’t mean to fight Dunkelfelger!”

He was getting anxious. At last, the severity of his actions had dawned on him.

“I just wanted to help Ortwin win Lady Hannelore’s heart,” Wilfried said. “An archnoble might have been a suitable partner for her before, but her sudden rise in status means she needs an archduke candidate from a greater duchy to protect her now. They’re a good match, so...”

Lord Ortwin issued his ditter challenge out of genuine affection? Consider me surprised.

The match was being called the battle for the second divine avatar, so I had naturally assumed Lord Ortwin’s motivations were to bring wealth to Drewanchel and secure his position as its next aub. We had entered a harsh new era where those who obtained their schtappes in their first year had to go above and beyond just to keep up with the competition.

Then again, perhaps Lord Ortwin exaggerated his feelings, and Wilfried simply never thought to question him.

Lord Ortwin was a master of speaking ambiguously to manipulate those around him. To him, Wilfried must have been the perfect target—someone with authority who never questioned what he was told. As my interrogation continued, I would need to find out what kind of aid Lord Ortwin desired and get Wilfried to agree that Ehrenfest would not, in fact, be supporting Drewanchel.

“You truly believe Lord Ortwin and Lady Hannelore would make a good couple?” I asked. “I do not see it myself.”

“Huh? You mean Ortwin isn’t good enough for her?!” Wilfried shouted, enraged by the slightest difference of opinion. “How are her archnoble suitors supposed to protect her now that she’s a divine avatar?!” He had lectured me time and time again about the importance of masking one’s emotions, so why was he wearing his on his sleeve?

In that regard, he reminds me of Grandmother—which is exactly why the Leisegangs still despise him.

“Lady Hannelore will have the protection of not just her fiancé, but her entire duchy. And what better guardian could she have than Dunkelfelger the First?”

“Hmm?”

“Remember what became of your engagement to Rozemyne,” I said. “If someone is deemed valuable to Yurgenschmidt, not even an aub can necessarily protect them. Authority and a duchy’s rank are where power truly lies, so wouldn’t Lady Hannelore be safer in Dunkelfelger the First than in Drewanchel the Fifth?”

Dunkelfelger had played a crucial role in Zent Eglantine’s rise to power and could make strong moves against her if necessary. In terms of protecting the new divine avatar, no duchy was better equipped.

“Furthermore,” I continued, “it is Aub Dunkelfelger’s right to decide which men are best suited for Lady Hannelore. As an outsider, you have no reason to weigh in.”

“How am I an outsider? Lady Hannelore’s my friend.”

“And you think that permits you to speak on her marriage?” I asked, eyes widening in surprise. “I assure you, friends don’t usually interfere with each other’s chosen suitors.”

In noble society, fathers chose their children’s partners based on what benefited their house and duchy. Each marriage needed the relevant aubs’ approval, with unions between archduke candidates requiring the Zent’s approval as well. I could not name a single friendship in which it was acceptable for one person to speak out against the other’s engagement.

“I do not know if Lord Ortwin asked for your aid,” I said, “but you should have consulted Father before agreeing to—”

“Ortwin didn’t ask for my aid. I *wanted* to support him. I thought that, if I could explain myself well enough, Lady Hannelore would understand what a great partner he would make.”

“Come again? You merely wished to support him?” It had never even occurred to me that Wilfried might have acted of his own volition. I supposed Drewanchel was neither trying to secure Ehrenfest as an ally nor take advantage of the upcoming ditter match.

So this blunder arose not from greed or manipulation, but from sheer thoughtlessness. How reckless can one boy be?

In an instant, all my assumptions were turned on their head. If anything, I would have preferred there to be an ulterior motive. Whatever was going through my brother’s mind, it was so baffling that it left me woozy.

“Brother, even if Lord Ortwin and Lady Hannelore were in love,

encouraging a girl to abandon the suitors her father chose for her in favor of a doomed romance is so inconsiderate that I do not even know what to say.”

“Really...?”

“Yes. Archduke candidates should not involve themselves in other people’s love lives. If you encouraged two people to get together in Ehrenfest, it could be seen as an order. Outside of Ehrenfest, it could be seen as political interference.”

The surprise that arose on my brother’s face made me bitter. I hated having to teach him such basic facts of life, but he seemed entirely incapable of figuring them out himself.

“At no point were you asked to get involved,” I continued. “Worse still, the people you tried to push together aren’t even mutually in love! You’ve been nothing but a burden to them.”

“Huh?! But I care for them both, and—”

“Your intentions are irrelevant. You troubled them deeply.”

For as long as I could remember, I had kept my mouth shut and deferred to Wilfried as his younger sister. Today, however, I was expected to act as Ehrenfest’s next aub. Staying silent was no longer an option.

I sighed, then faced my brother head-on. “To ensure Ehrenfest does not earn Dunkelfelger’s enmity, I order you to refrain from associating with Lord Ortwin or anyone from Drewanchel on a personal level until the bride-stealing ditto match is over.”

“Where’s this coming from? It’s not your choice who I speak to!” Wilfried yelled. He was glaring daggers at me, but I couldn’t back down.

“Since you are clearly incapable of properly considering interduchy relations, I have determined it necessary to intervene. Father has instructed me to act with the full authority of the next aub.”

“What?!” Wilfried exclaimed, his eyes wide as saucers. I had never spoken out against him so directly before.

“You must face the facts: Your blunder has placed Ehrenfest and Dunkelfelger at risk of becoming outright enemies.”

“And I feel bad about it, but it wasn’t on purpose. All we need to do is clear up Lady Hannelore’s misconception. Getting in the way of my friendship with Ortwin is going too far.”

I shook my head, rejecting his naive assumption out of hand. “Lady Hannelore has already questioned our duchy’s intentions,

meaning Father has no choice but to explain the situation and apologize. You must recognize how careless you've been, and how little consideration you've given to interduchy relations and to the changes Yurgenschmidt is going through. At the very least, your words and conduct today were wholly unbecoming of a fifth-year archduke candidate."

Wilfried gazed down at the letter on the table, then frowned. It was the face he always pulled when he was about to tune out a lecture. I sighed and glared at him even more sternly than before.

"Two years ago, Brother, Ehrenfest faced Dunkelfelger in ditter. Do you remember?"

"I mean, yeah...?" he said, the sudden change in topic prompting him to raise his head.

"Do you recall how all of Ehrenfest banded together and fought desperately to protect Rozemyne? How would you have felt if, in the midst of all that, Lord Ortwin sided with and supported Lord Lestilaut?"

I questioned him further, asking how he would feel if Lord Ortwin told him to his face that Lord Lestilaut was better suited to protect Rozemyne, or that she needed to marry into a greater duchy to be safe.

"Would you be grateful and rejoice that your friend gave you his honest opinion? Or would it upset you that an outsider was speaking out against an engagement Aub Ehrenfest had arranged for you?"

"Naturally, that would upset me—not that Ortwin would ever say something so rude."

So he understands it's rude when it comes from someone else.

That brought me some relief. If we were on the same page in that regard, I was sure I could make him understand just how unpleasant his own remarks had been.

"What if Lord Ortwin announced he would fully back Lord Lestilaut in ditter? Would you still call that nonhostile?"

"No... I would wonder what Drewanchel might do during the ditter match. If nothing else, I would be wary of them turning against us." Wilfried's eyes widened in realization, and he sighed. "I get what you're trying to say. Even if he said he didn't intend to be hostile, I'd still wonder why he went out of his way to say it to my face. I can't believe how inconsiderate and rude I was with Lady Hannelore."

At last, he seemed to grasp how his declaration had come across to others. It might have been cruel of me to celebrate my brother's mounting sadness, but to me, it was a relief.

"I am glad you understand," I said. "If it had been before Dunkelfelger and Drewanchel came into conflict, simply cheering on someone's crush shouldn't have ended with the aub having to apologize."

That was precisely why archduke candidates gathered information—so they could adjust their words and actions as circumstances changed. I was about to conclude the questioning on that note when Wilfried nodded.

"Right. Things have changed. My timing was just a little poor."

Anger surged through me. At a glance, my brother looked as though he understood what he'd done wrong and was truly regretting it. Our parents would probably end the lecture there, satisfied that he would change, but that gave him room to make excuses and stop reflecting on his behavior altogether. I felt as though I'd finally found the reason he kept making the same kinds of mistakes, even though he always seemed to repent whenever he was scolded.

"No, Wilfried. Your timing was not poor. Your actions were careless and betrayed a complete lack of introspection. An archduke candidate must do better."

"You're accusing me of not thinking things through enough?"

"Yes," I said without hesitation.

Wilfried stared at me in blank disbelief. He must have thought I would retract my criticism or apologize for going too far.

"You knew when you approached Lady Hannelore that a ditter match was being held for the right to marry her, and that duchies were preparing for an enormous battle, no?"

"Yeah, but I—"

"You knew, and you still didn't care. You gave no thought to your position or how you ought to conduct yourself. That shallow judgment led you to commit a blunder against the country's highest-ranked duchy, serious enough that Aub Ehrenfest himself must apologize. Yet you would brush it aside as bad timing or whatever other excuses you can conjure up?"

Wilfried refused to face reality, layering one excuse on top of another to escape his guilt. Worse still, he seemed to convince himself that his excuses were true, as though that could erase what

he had done wrong. I could not forgive it any longer.

“‘Excuses’...?” he muttered.

“You had good intentions. You didn’t mean for it to happen. Your timing was poor... Those are all excuses people use when they feel they did no wrong. If you truly understood the situation and regretted your actions, you would not have resorted to using them.”

“That wasn’t my inten—”

Wilfried paused mid-sentence. He had been on the verge of using one of the very excuses he was trying to deny.

I commend his sincerity, if nothing else.

Yet it would take a lot of work to forge his honesty into a desirable virtue for an archduke candidate. I watched him for a moment. Was it optimistic of me to think we had finally taken a step forward?

“Brother, it is not at all unusual for the situation around us to change. That is why archduke candidates care so much about gathering information, and why they always try to act for the benefit of their duchies. Going forward, you must think very, very carefully about interduchy relations, changes in faction politics, how your words might be interpreted, and the impact a single statement can have.”

Wilfried nodded, the picture of gloom.

I can only hope that he actually changes his behavior.

Though something told me it would not be that simple.

I sighed and took out an ordonnanz feystone. That would do for questioning Wilfried. I understood now that Drewanchel had nothing to do with my brother’s declaration—that it had simply been an ignorant, well-meaning mistake. There was no need to dig deeper; it made more sense to focus my attention on sending Lady Hannelore an apology.

How nerve-racking...

My ordonnanz would reach her before Father’s formal apology. After carefully planning what I would say, I tapped the white bird’s feystone with my schtappe, determined not to besmirch Ehrenfest’s name any further.

“Lady Hannelore, this is Charlotte of Ehrenfest,” I began, wincing at the quaver in my voice. What I did here would affect the relationship between our duchies, and as Ehrenfest’s next aub, I felt the weight of the burden on my shoulders. “Our aub will send a formal apology—but before then, I wished to dispel any notions

that we might side with Drewanchel against you. Please pass that assurance on to Aub Dunkelfelger as well.”

I swung my schtappe, and the ordonnanz took flight. I wondered how long it would be before Lady Hannelore responded, and whether she would even forgive us. I watched the window anxiously until, at last, the bird returned.

“Lady Charlotte, this is Hannelore. Thank you for putting our minds at ease. I look forward to when we next find time for a tea party together. As soon as Aub Ehrenfest’s letter arrives, I shall pass it along to my father. Please send him my regards.”

Her gentle voice washed away the tension that had seized me. I sensed the same relief among my retainers, and even my brother relaxed in his seat—an appreciable change from the beginning of the meeting, when he had failed to grasp even the gravity of our situation.

“Sounds like she accepted our apology,” he said. “That’s a relief.”

“Indeed,” I replied. “We can rest easy—for now. Father’s apology will not fully resolve the matter, and we must be even more mindful of our actions going forward, but... at the very least, we have avoided a complete breakdown in our relationship with Dunkelfelger.”

The ordonnanz repeated Lady Hannelore’s message twice more, then reverted to a yellow feystone and dropped neatly into my hand. I had fulfilled the duties Father expected of me—both interrogating Wilfried and offering our apologies to Lady Hannelore.

“Now, dear brother,” I continued, “Father has ordered you to return to Ehrenfest. You must leave at once.”

“‘At once’?!”

“Yes. You are to receive your scolding and return with his letter.”

I ushered my brother out of the meeting room and to the teleportation hall, leaving him no choice but to comply. He complained that even Rozemyne had been given three days’ notice, but I had no recollection of such a courtesy.

“That is everything,” I said at last. “We can leave the rest to Father.”

With my final task completed, I ate dinner with the quiet satisfaction of having done my duties as the next aub. It was then

that an ordonnanz from Professor Hirschur arrived.

“This is Hirschur. The Zent has issued orders to all dormitory supervisors: Archnobles and archduke candidates from every duchy are to gather in the auditorium at third-and-a-half bell tomorrow. Is that understood?”

The bird repeated the message twice more, then reverted to a feystone. I stared at it in shock, the color draining from my face once more. The teleportation hall had already closed for the day. We would have to wait until at least second bell tomorrow, when it reopened, before we could contact home.

The Zent had ordered all archduke candidates to assemble, but my brother had just returned to Ehrenfest. And if every duchy had been summoned, Dunkelfelger would be there as well. Since apologizing was of the utmost importance, we would need Father’s letter in hand by then.

“Father, this is an emergency! Please finish your letter of apology by third-and-a-half bell and have Wilfried bring it here at once! The Zent has issued new orders!”

The chaos Ehrenfest fell into at second bell the next morning could scarcely be put into words. All I could do was pray that the other duchies in the auditorium wouldn’t notice our disarray.

Trials of the Zent's First Year

“With both Hannelore and Rozemyne at the Academy this year, there’s bound to be some kind of incident. Those two have a history of escalating whatever issues cross their paths,” Anastasius had warned me. “I would tell you to brace yourself... but nothing will truly prepare you.”

Under the shadow of that ominous premonition, the academic term began.

Half a year had passed since Lady Rozemyne and Lord Ferdinand transferred a Grutrissheit to me and I became the new Zent. Yurgenschmidt now had three new duchies and archdukes, the Goddess of Wisdom’s descent had forbidden death penalties, and a revolution had removed the very concept of royalty that had endured since the time of Zent Rauchelstra.

Naturally, half a year was far from enough time to complete so many reforms. It felt like I was just blindly fumbling my way through.

We had relocated from Anastasius’s villa to the Adalgisa villa at the Royal Academy, which we were using as a provisional palace. Someday, we intended to construct a new palace using an entwickeln—but when that day would come, no one could say.

That said, only our living quarters had changed. The machinery of government had yet to follow, and much of the work was still being conducted in the old palace. High-level meetings that required my presence as the Zent were now held in rooms normally reserved for the Archduke Conference, while smaller gatherings that did not require me continued to take place in the Sovereignty.

It wasn’t for lack of effort. Moving an entire workplace into the Royal Academy was anything but simple. We first had to map the building itself; so much of it was off-limits that we scarcely knew how many rooms it contained. Then we needed a way to keep student areas and Sovereign workspaces as separate as possible. Little by little, we prepared quarters for servants and members of the Sovereign temple, expanded storage, and transferred documents

and records. But with ordinary duties demanding so much of our attention, progress remained maddeningly slow.

Old records indicate that the Royal Academy used to have farmlands and fruit gardens, but how are we to make them, and who will manage them? Do we need to pray to Flutrane as we do for the gathering spots?

Lord Ferdinand had insisted that we move to the Royal Academy, since the royal family of old had once lived there, but carrying that out was far easier said than done. Our way of life had changed too much, and the Academy lacked many of the magic tools we relied on for everyday living.

The Adalgisa villa was one of the few exceptions. It had remained in use until around the end of the civil war, and Lord Sigiswald had spent nearly a full year preparing it for Lady Rozemyne. Gervasio's group had even used it in secret. Thanks to all of that, we needed only to replace some of the furnishings.

The other villas, however, were in drastically worse condition. In theory, we could have remade them all with an *entwickeln*, as Alexandria had done, and then outfitted them with furniture and magic tools. But Yurgenschmidt was still emerging from a severe mana shortage. We had no choice but to make do.

Even knowing that our current predicament was, in part, a punishment from Lord Ferdinand, I could not help lamenting it as one problem after another demanded my attention. I could only hope I would have the fortitude to brush off any mockery he might direct at me for relying on the royal palace for so long.

I was still absorbed in thought when a scholar rushed into the room. "Zent Eglantine, we have a problem."

"What is it?" Anastasius asked with an exceptionally displeased grimace, sensing trouble that would keep me at my desk. He had finished teaching for the day and come to my office, waiting for me to finish the last of my work.

"Dregarnuhr the Goddess of Time has descended into Lady Hannelore in one of the gazebos east of the scholar building. She seems to be summoning Lady Rozemyne."

"Excuse me?" I asked, eyes widening in utter disbelief.

"See?! Those two again!" Anastasius cried. "I told you this would happen—though I would rather have been wrong."

Lady Hannelore and Lady Rozemyne were not the Academy's only sources of trouble, but I could not deny how often their names

came up. Time and again, they were at the center of issues serious enough to require the royal family's direct involvement.

"Wait just a moment," I said. "Are you saying that, without warning, a goddess descended into Lady Hannelore—and not in the chapel or the Garden of Beginnings, but in a gazebo...?"

"That is correct."

"Oh dear..." I sighed. "What should we do?"

We had no one capable of handling the situation. Sovereign nobles typically returned to their duchies for winter socializing, and with so many now devoting renewed effort to strengthening ties with their homelands, we were more short-staffed than ever. We maintained only the bare minimum of personnel on rotation—and it was nowhere near enough to respond to an urgent summons from an actual goddess.

"Eglantine, a crowd is sure to amass around the gazebo," Anastasius said. "Should we not send knights to keep the peace?"

"Indeed. Send scholars as well so they can report back to us. Attendants, prepare a meeting room. I shall await more information."

But as I turned to my attendants, the scholar immediately said, "There is no need to prepare a meeting room. Not enough is known for us to expect any further reports."

"Even though a goddess has descended...?" I asked.

"As it stands, no one can approach her," the scholar said. My confusion must have shown on my face, because he quickly added, "Lady Hannelore and Lord Kenntrips of Dunkelfelger, Lord Ortwin of Drewanchel, and Lord Wilfried of Ehrenfest were discussing something in the gazebo when the Goddess of Time abruptly descended into Lady Hannelore."

He had obtained this information from the retainers gathered around the gazebo, who had been waiting for their charges to finish speaking. As things stood, we still didn't know what had happened, what the group had been discussing, or what had triggered the descent.

"The goddess expelled everyone except Lady Hannelore from the gazebo, and no one has been able to enter since," the scholar continued. "Some have made it closer than others, which has led us to suspect that mana capacity is a factor. At present, everyone is simply waiting for Lady Rozemyne to arrive. She is currently attending to an emergency in Alexandria, however, so it might take

some time—which is why I chose to report to you.”

“I see. In that case, I should stay here in my office. My daughter would never let me leave if I went back to my quarters.”

Anastasius frowned at my decision. I would have told him to return to our room ahead of me, but it would only frustrate him further.

“Will you not visit the goddess?” one of my knights asked, confused.

“You have the gods’ recognition and inherited the Grutrissheit from the divine avatar,” one of my attendants added. “If anyone would be permitted into the gazebo, surely it would be you, Zent Eglantine.”

Faced with my retainers’ hopeful stares, I shook my head. I had not obtained the Book of Mestionora through my own power and thus could not truly serve as an intermediary between mankind and the gods.

They have such faith in me. I cannot allow them to see the Goddess of Time reject me.

“I shall not go,” I declared. “Such rudeness is beneath me.”

“Zent Eglantine?”

“The Goddess of Time has asked for Lady Rozemyne specifically. Imagine this were a tea party—would the host welcome the arrival of an uninvited guest?”

“Ah...” Understanding dawned on my retainers’ faces. “Forgive my shortsightedness.”

“Rarely does a goddess descend, so I understand your desire to see it, but the gods do not think as we do. I worry that anyone who approaches the gazebo lightly will receive divine punishment.” I knew only of the Goddess of Wisdom, who descended into Lady Rozemyne, and of Erwaermen, but the gods were anything but kind to humanity.

“Understood. We shall ask the knights and scholars deployed to the area to keep any students or professors from getting too close. We will also ensure that no one keeps Lady Rozemyne from the goddess.”

“Thank you.”

One of my knights departed to spread the word, and I gazed down at the magic tool on my wrist. Perhaps the Grutrissheit explained the nuances of gods inviting humans to their world. I decided to do what I could—at least, without having to rummage

through the paperwork I had just put away.

“Grutrisshheit,” I chanted.

No matter how much I searched, I could find nothing of use. Perhaps when the tool was made, such information had been deemed unnecessary for me to carry out my duties as the Zent.

Not that I ever expected to need to know this much.

I wondered how many humans had been invited to the world of the gods. Perhaps there were useful documents in the Zent’s exclusive archive, but it would take me far too long to go through them all alone. It seemed wiser to simply ask those involved—or someone with the Book of Mestionora.

A short while later, the scholar returned.

“Zent, I come with another report. Though it might be hard to believe, Lady Rozemyne went with the Goddess of Time to the world of the gods. They both vanished before our very eyes.”

“Come again?”

The scholar explained that Lady Rozemyne had arrived at the gazebo in military dress, as if ready for battle. She had exchanged some words with Dunkelfelger, then disappeared upon entering the gazebo. I had seen a goddess descend before, but I could not wrap my head around someone leaving for the world of the gods.

“What happened to Lady Hannelore?” I asked.

“She was suspended in midair during the goddess’s descent, then fell as soon as Lady Rozemyne vanished. She was not injured—someone from her duchy caught her—but she has yet to awaken, and her guard knights carried her back to her dormitory.”

Still, the gazebo was surrounded by students and professors thrilled by the spectacle. Knights were having to shoo them away.

“I see. Thank you for telling me. At third bell tomorrow, I should like to speak to those who were present at the gazebo. Then, at fifth bell, I will speak to Lady Letizia of Alexandria. Send emergency summons to each dormitory.”

After giving out my orders, I left my office with Anastasius to return to our living quarters. I had an exceptionally busy day ahead of me; I wished to spend at least tonight in peace.

“Zent Eglantine, your guests have arrived.”

“Let them in, if you would.”

My attendant granted entry to Lord Kenntrips, Lord Ortwin, and Lord Wilfried—of Dunkelfelger, Drewanchel, and Ehrenfest,

respectively.

“How fares Lady Hannelore?” I asked, recognizing her absence. “I understand she was unconscious when she was taken back to the Dunkelfelger Dormitory.”

“She has not yet awoken,” Kenntrips answered. “The Goddess of Time said she will remain in a half dead state until she regains consciousness. As we speak, she is soaking in a jureve.”

“Excuse me?”

I took in a sharp breath despite myself. Lady Rozemyne had regained consciousness upon the Goddess of Wisdom’s departure. Far from being “half dead,” she had returned with me to the transference ceremony—though I supposed there had been lasting consequences with divine power and such. I was unsure what differed in this case, but we could trust that the goddess was correct.

“We shall contact you as soon as Lady Hannelore awakens.”

“Thank you. For now, tell me more of the goddess’s descent.” I had heard what rumors and insights my scholars could gather, but there was much I could ascertain only by speaking to those who were involved.

First and foremost, I learned that a mere parting of ways could summon a god under the correct circumstances.

“As soon as Lady Hannelore bade us farewell, the charm on her hand shone, and a magic circle appeared on the roof of the gazebo,” Lord Ortwin began. “From that circle, the goddess descended. It seemed she had been seeking a vessel to use, and it was mere coincidence that Lady Hannelore had a relevant feystone and stated her divine name in a prayer-like fashion.”

How could anyone have predicted that?!

Even just hearing Lord Ortwin’s report made my head spin. I could only imagine how shocked Lady Hannelore must have been.

But what I fear most is knowing the gods could descend upon the Royal Academy at any moment...

I had thought the gods could descend only in the Garden of Beginnings. We had a map of the general locations of the small shrines, and both Lord Trauerqual and Lord Sigiswald had visited those of the elements they needed—but there were bound to be some that had escaped our notice. The gazebo had presumably been, by sheer coincidence, a small shrine to the Goddess of Time.

Does this now mean we have to reinvestigate them? Give me a

break... When will I ever find the time?

"That reminds me," Lord Wilfried interjected. "The goddess said she could not leave the magic circle after she descended."

That was excellent news. At least I would not need to fear the gods freely wandering the Academy's grounds.

"She mentioned some kind of disaster," he continued.

"Apparently, the Grutrissheit could vanish, and roughly two decades of history might collapse."

"Hold on... Two decades?" I repeated. "What in the world happened...?"

"That is all we know. Lady Rozemyne seemed to have a better grasp of the problem, and she departed for the world of the gods to hear more."

Though I now knew what had preceded the goddess's descent, I had an even more pressing concern. Two decades of history were apparently at risk. But with Lady Hannelore still unconscious and Lady Rozemyne in the world of the gods, there was nothing we could do.

It would seem I must leave the rest to Lady Rozemyne. Though if we are given a chance to redo those twenty years... could we not prevent the civil war from ever happening?

I pushed aside that errant thought. But no matter how much I tried to focus on the boys' report, I could not stop thinking about regaining the family I had lost.

At fifth bell, Lady Letizia of Alexandria arrived. She trembled so fiercely that I could see it with my own eyes. I'd had no choice but to summon her; she was the only representative of Alexandria at the Academy now that Lady Rozemyne had gone to the world of the gods, and summoning an elder archnoble in her place would have been a grave insult.

"I am sorry to have summoned you," I said, offering the calmest smile I could. "If you are anxious, do not worry—no first-year would normally receive an emergency summons from the Zent before even passing her first etiquette class."

I gazed upon Lady Letizia's retainers and spied Lady Rozemyne's head attendant among them. It came as some relief that the two girls were working together.

"As joyous as it must be that Lady Rozemyne has been summoned by the gods, it also means a new duchy is now without its aub," I continued. "I will need to discuss the political

ramifications with Lord Ferdinand. Please deliver this to him.”

I had no business with Lady Letizia herself. But as I held out my letter, hoping to free the poor girl from her agony, she shook her head.

“I cannot accept this letter.”

“Why not?”

Lady Letizia turned to her retainers for help, and Lady Rozemyne’s head attendant nodded. “Zent Eglantine, I am Lieseleta, head attendant to Aub Alexandria. May I speak?”

“You may.”

Lieseleta took a step forward. “We suspect Lord Ferdinand is the source of this incident. He is unconscious and half transparent. Even if Lady Letizia gave him your letter, he would not be able to respond.”

“Come again?!”

My voice came out sharper than intended. I had thought Alexandria would be fine as long as Lord Ferdinand was there, but that expectation had been utterly uprooted. Now, I could not even ask him about the goddess’s invitation.

“I apologize. That was unbecoming of me,” I said, seeing Lieseleta’s shock at my exclamation. “Please continue.”

She promptly refocused and explained what was happening in Alexandria. Yesterday, upon learning that Lord Ferdinand had suddenly collapsed, Lady Rozemyne had rushed back home to Alexandria. Lieseleta had accompanied the young aub as her head attendant, meaning she had seen the trouble with her own eyes.

“After abruptly collapsing in his office, Lord Ferdinand was carried to his bedroom,” Lieseleta explained. “His body started to grow transparent—and by the time we arrived, he was barely even visible. We tried to touch him, and our hands went straight through his body. Lady Rozemyne announced she would ask the gods what was happening, and it was just as she was gathering the necessary potions and magic tools that she received an urgent summons from the Royal Academy. The Goddess of Time had descended into Lady Hannelore and wished to speak with her.”

Lady Rozemyne had instructed that her potions and magic tools be teleported at once, then rushed back to the dormitory. There, she changed into her riding clothes and gathered together as much as she could to bring to the world of the gods.

“That is as much as I know,” the head attendant concluded.

I praised Lieseleta for her efforts and turned to Lady Letizia. Alexandria must have descended into chaos if it had lost not just its divine avatar but also the man unilaterally controlling its government.

How will the nobles of Old Ahrensbach react?

I couldn't say whether the retainers Lady Rozemyne and Lord Ferdinand had left behind would be able to rein them in. And Lady Letizia—the only remaining archduke candidate of Old Ahrensbach—was still just a first-year.

“Lady Letizia, I praise your decision to bring one of Lady Rozemyne's retainers here with you,” I said. “There are bound to be nobles of Old Ahrensbach who consider this the perfect opportunity to uplift you. They will approach you with kind words and thoughtful gifts, but you must not let them manipulate you. Work as closely with Lady Rozemyne's retainers as you can.”

I recalled with bitterness how Raublut had deceived and manipulated Lord Hildebrand.

“Indeed.” Lady Letizia gave a firm nod, her expression stern. Perhaps she was all too familiar with those who meant to take advantage of her. “Lady Rozemyne, too, said I must not return to Alexandria under any circumstances.”

“Should the situation grow too much for you and your retainers to handle, do not hesitate to contact me. As the Zent, my assistance might be considered meddling in duchy affairs, but these are extenuating circumstances. I shall be your shield in Lady Rozemyne's absence.”

“Your words are a great comfort,” Lady Letizia replied. “I thank you ever so much for being so considerate of Alexandria.”

I would rather avoid a veritable bloodbath when Lord Ferdinand and Lady Rozemyne return.

Barely had the Goddess of Wisdom forbidden the taking of lives when Lord Ferdinand trapped Gervasio within a country gate, destroyed his medal, and left him to starve—technically in compliance with her command. He wouldn't need to stage a purge to leave a growing river of blood in his wake.

Once my Alexandrian guests had departed, I returned to my office.

“Zent Eglantine, I have compiled the questions we received from the duchies. They wish to know whether the rumors of a goddess's descent are true.”

"I shall waste none of my scholars on duchies too incompetent to trust their own students," I said at once. "Send ordonnances to their dormitory supervisors. Inform them that if they want more detailed reports, they will have to send their own scholars."

During the emergency, Lady Hannelore came to be regarded as the second divine avatar. My scholars reported that the claim had originated among those who witnessed the goddess's descent firsthand. Now those whispers had swelled into something else entirely—into rumors that she might be granted the Grutrissheit as Lady Rozemyne was, or that someone other than me might obtain it.

"Some began to wonder if the goddess's decision not to summon you meant you weren't suited to rule. Others claimed you should have greeted her, but their arguments were quickly torn apart by your tea party example. Now, most are focused on which duchy Lady Hannelore should marry into."

My knights and scholars had informed me of the growing consensus that the second divine avatar was far too important to marry an archduke of her own duchy, and that Aub Dunkelfelger would do well to marry her elsewhere.

"Only one day has passed since the goddess's descent," I said. "How can the discourse have evolved this quickly?"

"Something about it feels deliberate, but we lack the manpower to investigate. We can only hope the scholars return from their duchies sooner rather than later."

On that note, we returned to our duties, hoping the aubs seeking more information would return their Sovereign scholars to us.

"Apologies, Eglantine," Anastasius said. "I received a rather troublesome letter from my brother."

In his letter, Lord Sigiswald insisted that, as a former prince, he was the most suitable match for the second divine avatar. He also said that a word of encouragement from the new Zent would go a long way toward putting him at ease. I sighed; his request made the origin of the recent surge of rumors painfully clear.

"This part about my input—is he asking for a royal decree?"

"Most likely. My brother would not write to me without a demand of that magnitude in mind."

"I cannot give royal decrees on engagements unless they are

essential for the country as a whole. The royal decree that Lord Gieselfried requested was to ensure that Ahrensbach, a greater duchy and the only territory with an open country gate, would not be destroyed.”

At the time, the greater duchies had been forced to manage the deposed duchies without a Grutrissheit. Had Ahrensbach collapsed under those conditions, all of Yurgenschmidt might have followed. The decree had also served as part of the compensation owed to Ahrensbach, left with no choice but to remove its already selected successors in the aftermath of the purge. That was why Lord Gieselfried’s requests—for a capable husband for Lady Detlinde, to stabilize the duchy while she served as interim aub, and for the third prince to marry Lady Letizia, securing her position as the next aub—had ultimately been granted.

“A marriage between Lord Sigiswald and Lady Hannelore would not help the country at large,” I said. Korinthsdaum needed to form connections with other duchies and expand its population, but that was far from a good enough excuse. As much as they surely wanted the help and support of the country’s topmost duchy, they could make do with those lower in the rankings.

Lady Hannelore already had prospective fiancés, and a union with Lord Sigiswald would mean marrying down. Under those circumstances, even a marriage ordered by royal decree would not be considered an honor for her. It was nothing like Lord Ferdinand’s case, when people argued that—since he was being mistreated in his home duchy’s temple—he should be married into a greater duchy and granted a position worthy of his talents.

“Worst of all, a royal decree of that nature would drive a wedge between Dunkelfelger and me. I trust those of Dunkelfelger are already helping Blumenfeld through Lady Magdalena; they would not have the means to support Korinthsdaum as well.”

More than half a year had passed since Lord Sigiswald was made an aub; he ought to have accepted that his position had changed. If two or three years from now, he still refused to see sense, I would not hesitate to reeducate him.

“My brother might have sought your help because Dunkelfelger formally refused him,” Anastasius said. “We should contact Aub Dunkelfelger before we do anything else.”

“Indeed. Whether he has received a proposal or not, if we inform him that we know the source of these contrived rumors—

and that I will issue no such decree—then he should find it far easier to act. I trust you will respond to Lord Sigiswald.”

The next day, I received a letter from Lord Trauerqual. It seemed Lord Sigiswald had sought even his help in securing an engagement to Lady Hannelore. His fixation on marrying the second divine avatar was now beyond doubt, and a shiver ran down my spine as I recalled how he had behaved when he pursued marriage with me in his bid for the throne.

“Zent Eglantine—I apologize for the trouble Sigiswald is causing. I pray that you refuse him, then spare him not another thought. It is your first year as Zent, and I regret that a crisis as unexpected as the Goddess of Time’s descent has caused so much uncertainty. I can only imagine what you are enduring. You have my deepest sympathies. Please take good care of yourself.”

The letter put me at ease, for it both permitted me to ignore Lord Sigiswald and praised my efforts thus far. Yet I also sensed something else—a quiet satisfaction that he was free of the burdens of my role. That it irritated me, even just a little, was probably a sign of my exhaustion.

“Lindenthal just issued a challenge as well,” one of my knights reported, having circled the central building. “The hopes people have for the second divine avatar seem grand indeed.”

I massaged my temples. A week had passed since the goddess’s descent, and more duchies were challenging Dunkelfelger to bride-stealing ditter by the day.

“Do these lesser and middle duchies truly not see what is happening?” my head attendant sighed, brow furrowed. “They are playing right into Korinthsdaum’s hands.”

I smiled wryly. “With Lady Hannelore as the treasure, who can blame them? The more duchies that participate, the more Dunkelfelger will be worn down, giving even the least likely contenders a chance at victory.”

No matter my thoughts about him, Lord Sigiswald was an expert at political maneuvering. He had not even needed to visit the Royal Academy for so many duchies to dance to his tune. Soon, half the country would be involved in this ditter match.

“Then why does Dunkelfelger continue to accept their challenges, despite the disadvantage it puts them at? It really is

most strange.”

“Perhaps they simply yearn for more opponents. If you think back to their group research some years ago...”

“Oh yes, I remember now.”

They had required all those who wanted to join their joint research to face them in ditter. Just how obsessed were they?

Why can Dunkelfelger not settle these matters peacefully through discussion?

“And from what I recall, most of those duchies received quite a beating...” one of my attendants said. “They must not have learned their lesson.”

“As hard as it must have been for them, they gained much from participating in that ceremony,” I said. “They might expect to reap the rewards again. Or perhaps they simply fear being left behind.”

By throwing their hats in the ring, they would earn Dunkelfelger’s favor and—with any luck—the hand of the second divine avatar. I could understand why the duchies would want to participate, no matter how much it might burden them.

One of my scholars frowned. “Still, are the lesser and middle duchies not at risk of being crushed? No matter how I look at it, I fear Lord Sigiswald has convinced them to act against their own best interests. Should we not put a stop to this match?”

As much as I wished for peace, I saw no easy way to intervene. Dunkelfelger had already strong-armed the other duchies into playing ditter once before.

“Certainly, with this many duchies participating, the match will have a greater impact on Yurgenschmidt than is ideal,” I said. “If we cannot stop it, I should at least like to request Dunkelfelger’s help in scaling it back or minimizing the casualties. Does anyone have any ideas?”

My retainers put forward several possible courses of action. Personally, I thought the best solution would be to issue a royal decree ordering that Lady Hannelore marry whomever she told me she loved. I already intended to summon her when she regained consciousness, so I would propose the idea to her then.

When word reached me that Lady Hannelore had awakened, I summoned her for questioning at once. It proved to be a fruitful conversation.

“Eglantine, how was your meeting with Hannelore?” Anastasius

asked upon his return from class. “Did everything go to plan?”

“Not quite... To save you the suspense, Dunkelfelger didn’t agree to bride-stealing ditto merely for the fun of it.”

“What? Seriously?”

“As I now understand it, challenging a duchy to bride-stealing ditto is effectively the same as objecting to its aub’s choice of suitors. From Dunkelfelger’s perspective, the other duchies have issued open declarations of war in an attempt to claim Lady Hannelore for themselves. And since Dunkelfelger intends to keep her, they have had no choice but to accept.”

I conveyed all that Lady Hannelore had told me: That this match would be a genuine massacre, fought with a duchy’s pride and an archduke candidate’s future on the line. That, traditionally, the challenger’s entire family would need to go to the duchy they wished to steal from. That, unlike the ditto played in class, both sides would put their very lives on the line. And that, rather than leaving the fighting to the knights, the challengers and their fathers would need to participate. In other words, the battle to come was going to be far more dangerous—and more consequential—than we could ever have imagined.

“The challengers are all archduke candidates, no? And their fathers are all aubs,” Anastasius mused. “A battle between them without restrictions could result in the destruction of entire duchies.”

“Indeed, and that is precisely the kind of conflict Dunkelfelger is preparing for. Their perspective on the matter is so drastically different from anyone else’s.”

Anastasius’s features twisted in alarm. I had scheduled my meeting with Lady Hannelore for when he was teaching, so as to put her more at ease, but perhaps it would have been better for him to be there.

“For the country’s sake, we must do something,” he said. “How did Lady Hannelore respond to your proposals that we stop the match from happening at all? Your retainers had plenty of ideas, didn’t they?”

“Yes, but every one was refused. Lady Hannelore spoke against any solutions that would outright forbid the match, for that would mean angering Dunkelfelger for the sake of its challengers.”

Anastasius placed a hand on his forehead. I even heard him groan. “Their usual obsession with ditto confused things, but I can

see how these challenges are well and truly obscene. Was my brother aware of that when he instigated the other duchies? I would assume so.”

I nodded in agreement. Lord Sigiswald cared only about securing Lady Hannelore for Korinthsdaum. How did he intend to benefit other duchies when he was no longer royalty?

“Lady Hannelore told me that, to stop the match, I would need to approach the challengers,” I said.

“I suppose that makes sense. If there are no challengers, there can be no ditter match.”

We both let out heavy sighs.

“For now, I asked Lady Hannelore to summarize our discussion and send it to Aub Dunkelfelger in a letter—including my request for the match to be held at the Royal Academy, under my supervision.”

“Interesting. Ideally, we’ll reduce the scale of the match as much as we can.”

I had to wonder—had all the troubles thrust upon me since the goddess’s descent been a trial from Glucklitat? I could only pray that, when I finally overcame them, I would receive good fortune in equal measure.

“Zent Eglantine. A letter from Aub Dunkelfelger.”

It was lunchtime when the message reached us, having arrived through Dunkelfelger’s dormitory supervisor. Anastasius and I finished eating as quickly as we could, then read through the aub’s response. Apart from the usual greetings, he got straight to the point.

“Under normal circumstances, I would not permit even the Zent to interfere. But since one of our participants is clearly manipulating the others, I accept your involvement.”

At once, I felt as though a huge weight had been lifted from my shoulders. “If nothing else, at least he agreed to this much.”

The aub’s letter went on to say that he did not mind the match being held at the Royal Academy, since it would spare Dunkelfelger’s land from being ravaged. In other words, the Academy would bear the damage instead. The thought of the mana we would need to restore it made my head ache, but compared to the alternative—half of Yurgenschmidt laid to waste—it was a small price to pay.

“Dunkelfelger is no pushover,” Anastasius said. “The aub added conditions of his own. If the match is to be held at the Royal Academy, he wants you to do your utmost to prevent alliances between duchies, and to stop nonparticipants from providing external aid.”

The duchies that had issued their challenges without truly understanding bride-stealing ditter likely assumed it would resemble its treasure-stealing counterpart. If so, the preparatory period would see lesser and middle duchies banding together, or greater duchies absorbing them wholesale. Dunkelfelger feared exactly what would follow—swarm tactics, with a mass of enemies crashing into them all at once.

And they are right to worry.

Lord Sigiswald was surely counting on that scenario. I could not say whether he truly understood bride-stealing ditter himself, or whether he was doing this unknowingly, but the result was the same.

“As I have declared my willingness to oversee the ditter match,” I said, “I must do my part as well. The key will be finding a way to restrain Lord Sigiswald.”

“Right. Though what I fear most is this part about offensive magic tools.”

Anastasius pointed to the next section:

“I understand your wish to minimize deaths by limiting the use of offensive magic tools, but I cannot agree to that unconditionally. In the past, there was a man who excelled at sowing chaos in treasure-stealing ditter. If we see any sign of similar conduct—uninvolved duchies providing aid or support solely to bring about Dunkelfelger’s defeat—then we will unilaterally disregard your restriction. Furthermore, while we will limit the strength of our magic tools, we cannot promise there will be no deaths.”

I had the sudden urge to make that unnamed troublemaker answer for the lasting consequences of his misdeeds. Even so, I understood Dunkelfelger’s position. If not for my involvement, they would likely have countered any “human wave” tactics by simply throwing magic tools until every one of their enemies was dead. Relocating the match to the Royal Academy, exposing them to interference by uninvolved duchies, and restricting their use of magic tools all at once placed them at an extraordinary disadvantage.

"I shall agree to these conditions," I said. "We must tighten our watch to ensure that no uninvolved duchies interfere with the match."

"More than that," Anastasius began, his expression pale as he pointed to the next part of the letter, "we should push as many duchies as possible to withdraw."

"Bride-stealing ditter matches are decided as follows: Should the challengers be killed or expelled from the specified region, the bride's side is considered the winner. Should the bride be stolen and removed from the specified region, the challengers are considered victorious. As this match will be held at the Royal Academy, the challengers will succeed if they steal the bride, and lose if they are all killed or if the knights within their territory are all expelled."

My eyes widened. "If they are all killed"?! Dunkelfelger has no intention of resolving this peacefully, does it? I cannot accept the challengers' deaths as a victory condition. What can we do to have it removed?"

I racked my brain for a solution as I returned my attention to the letter.

"I will permit fools who issued their challenge without understanding bride-stealing ditter to withdraw. Let it be known that their aubs must petition me directly at the Interduchy Tournament; Dunkelfelger's students should no longer be treated like ordonnanzes. Furthermore, I require a promise that Dunkelfelger will not be held responsible for what becomes of the duchies that do not back down."

"I suppose we have no choice but to abandon the duchies that refuse to withdraw even after bride-stealing ditter is properly explained to them," Anastasius said. "It is hardly our responsibility to break our backs rescuing them from their own foolishness."

"Indeed."

They were being allowed to withdraw; if they maintained their challenges with full knowledge of the risks, I had no choice but to accept whatever followed.

"Let us require the aubs of any duchies that do not withdraw to name a successor before the match begins," I said. "They shall participate only after the bare minimum of the handover process is underway."

After the purge, there had been cases where only the unsuitable children of third wives remained as candidates. Oaths and customs had been lost, forcing duchies to make do with what little

remained. Any aub who chose to participate would need at least that much resolve.

“Would that not prevent my brother from participating?” Anastasius asked. “He has a son, but the boy is too young to have been baptized.”

“Oh my.” A smile came unbidden to my lips. “Then Lady Nahelache can serve as interim aub until her son comes of age.”

Anastasius stroked my cheek. “I understand how you feel, but this wrath does not suit you.”

“How can I not be furious? I refuse to spare Lord Sigiswald even another moment of my time. Look.” I pointed. “See how the letter continues.”

Anastasius read aloud. “From my perspective, Aub Korinthsdaum is a lesser archduke. Had he not made an enemy of me, I would have respected him as former royalty—but at this point, I have no intention of showing him mercy or treating him as such. Should you, as the Zent, hope for peace, I suggest you keep a close eye on the pernicious weeds polluting your garden.” He exhaled. “I see. Let us pray my brother withdraws alongside the others.”

Lord Sigiswald’s future as Dunkelfelger’s mortal enemy was unlikely to be a bright one, and Anastasius knew his brother well enough to suspect he would never withdraw.

I sympathized with Anastasius as he mourned his brother by blood, but as the arbitrator of this match, I was simply relieved that withdrawal remained an option for the others. I would still need to proceed carefully—reviewing Dunkelfelger’s conditions and setting limits on how many participants each duchy could field, among other things—but this was a significant step forward.

“Let us pray to the gods that this term passes without further ill winds,” I said.

Anastasius blinked; then his expression turned solemn. “Those winds will blow the moment Rozemyne returns, will they not? She is doing something in the past. We just received that bizarre letter from Klassenberg.”

Indeed. A letter from Klassenberg had arrived, questioning the “guidance of the Goddess of Time.” A retainer of the Zent from two generations ago—a scholar who had fallen ill before the civil war and retired to Klassenberg—had regained a most curious memory.

He had suddenly recalled a woman appearing in the

Sovereignty and declaring that she had come at the guidance of the Goddess of Time, and said that he suspected Lady Rozemyne was in the past. The letter softened the claim by suggesting it might have been a dream, but it nonetheless asked whether I knew anything.

“Yes, but I was measured in my response,” I said. ““Oh, who is to say whether it was Lady Rozemyne? I know nothing of this matter. Do contact me again if you learn anything more.””

In truth, it could only have been Lady Rozemyne. And it was unmistakably clear that she was rampaging through time to save Lord Ferdinand.

It even matches the records I found in the archive accessible only to the Zent.

When Lord Trauerqual investigated Lord Ferdinand, he reported finding no records of him. That was simply because he, lacking a Gruttrissheit, could not access the Zent’s private archive.

I, however, could.

According to the records I had found, a woman wielding the Gruttrissheit had appeared by the Goddess of Time’s guidance. She forbade a particular seed of Adalgisa from being turned into a feystone, then repelled attacks from the entire Sovereign Knight’s Order using a particular divine instrument.

Afterward, the Zent of the time and his retainers went to the Adalgisa villa, where she declared that Ehrenfest needed the seed of Adalgisa to continue existing. The Zent accepted her guidance and ordered Aub Ehrenfest to take the seed home. That seed was named Ferdinand.

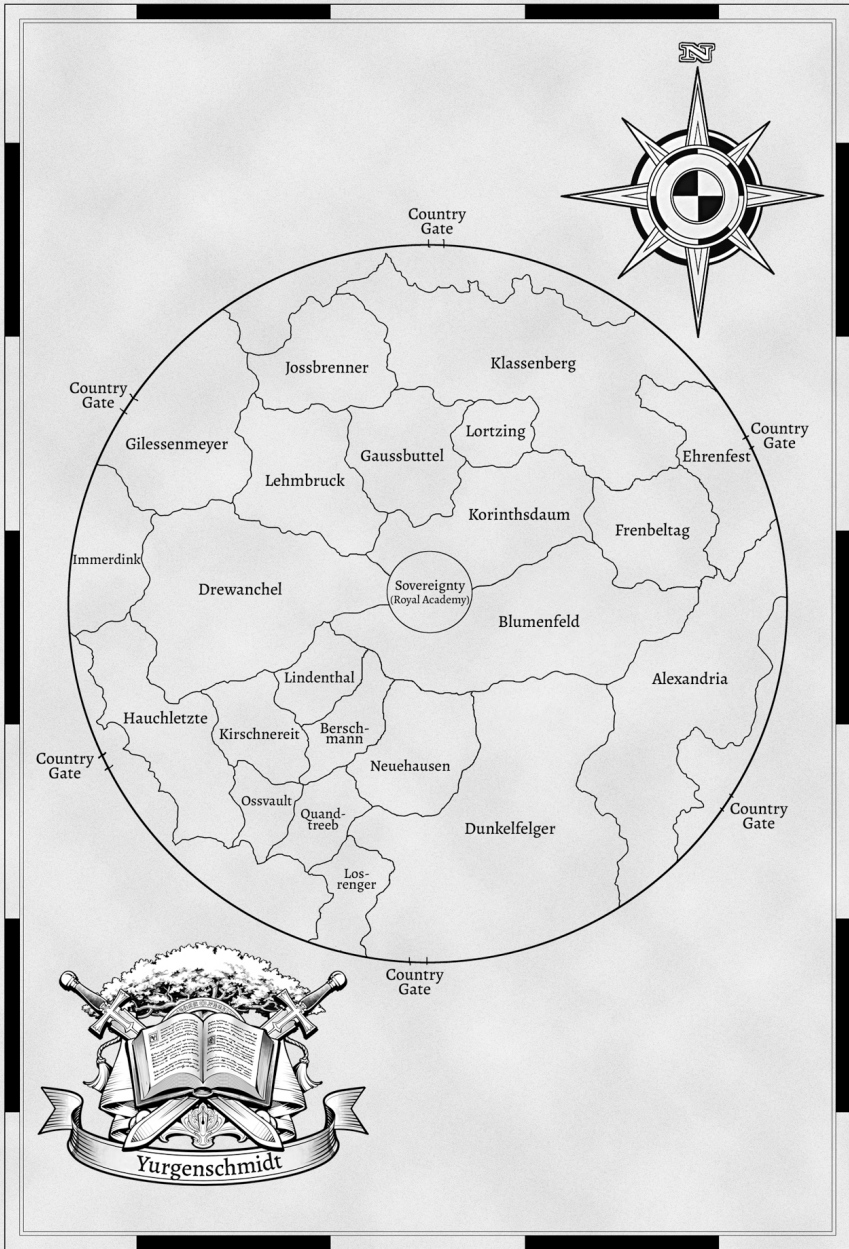
This information was available only in the Zent’s archive, so I had not even told Anastasius.

“That might have been how you responded to Klassenberg,” he said, “but is there truly any doubt the woman was Rozemyne?”

“None at all,” I replied. “I cannot imagine Dregarnuhr has sent many others through time to prevent history’s collapse.”

“Then when she returns, we will surely suffer the aftereffects of whatever occurred in the world of the gods. Peace is... anything but near,” Anastasius said, his gaze distant.

I considered the mountain of problems awaiting us and smiled. “Let us refrain from thinking about Lady Rozemyne for the moment.”



Afterword

Hello again. It's Miya Kazuki. Thank you very much for reading the second volume of *Ascendance of a Bookworm: Hannelore's Fifth Year at the Royal Academy*.

This time, the prologue was from Kenntrips's perspective. It's almost an exact copy of a side story I posted online. I remember feeling anxious when I first wrote it, unsure whether readers would accept his inner thoughts. I worried they might think he was idealizing her too much and doubt the sincerity of his feelings as a result.

The volume proper opened with Hannelore waking up and being stunned by everything that transpired in her absence. Her retainers were split between those supporting her suitors and those backing Raufereg, while duchies challenged Dunkelfelger to bride-stealing ditto one after another. She took her first step forward by ensuring she and her retainers were on the same page, drawing on her experience from the world of the past.

From there, things accelerated. Hannelore exchanged intelligence, attended meetings about bride-stealing ditto, and even found herself on the receiving end of confessions from Raufereg, Ortwin, and Rasantark.

Hannelore's position has changed dramatically—from a Dunkelfelger girl expected to be married off to another duchy, to the divine avatar's friend meant to remain within Dunkelfelger, and finally to the second divine avatar sought by the entire country. To secure the future she desires, she must make difficult choices and act decisively.

Personally, I had the most fun writing the scene in which she returns to Dunkelfelger. In my original outline, those developments were meant to unfold through letters alone—but once I imagined the family speaking face-to-face, I realized the scene needed to happen in person.

The epilogue was told from Ortwin's perspective. Though he was ultimately rejected, he succeeded in securing a cooperative

relationship with Dunkelfelger for the upcoming ditter match. What was he up to in the years prior, you might ask? I included an extended flashback to answer just that. Adolphine stole the spotlight in the end, but I hope the chapter successfully conveyed Ortwin coming to terms with his feelings and moving forward.

The newly written chapters were from Charlotte's and Eglantine's perspectives.

Charlotte received a sudden letter from Hannelore and, for the first time, confronted Wilfried not as his sister, but as the next aub. What was Wilfried thinking when he declared his support for Ortwin? What, exactly, was wrong with his behavior? Let's pray that her observations actually reach him.

Eglantine's chapter showed her being tossed about by one abrupt development after another. In her first year as Zent, she finds herself agonizing over an unrelenting cascade of problems. Anastasius has known Rozemyne for a long time, and thus can anticipate things most people would never consider. I hope that, as a couple, they work hard to resolve these issues together.

This volume's cover art depicts Hannelore at the center, spear in hand, encircled by Kenntrips, Rasantark, and Ortwin in a love triangle, while Rozemyne departs to repair the threads of history. Hannelore looks every bit the hero—the very picture of a Dunkelfelger archduke candidate.

For the color illustration, I requested a scene of Dunkelfelger's archducal family awaiting the outcome of the dormitory ditter match. To be perfectly honest, I wanted character designs for Reichlene and Lungtase and was determined to see them in color. I am extremely satisfied with the result.

You Shiina-sama, thank you very much.

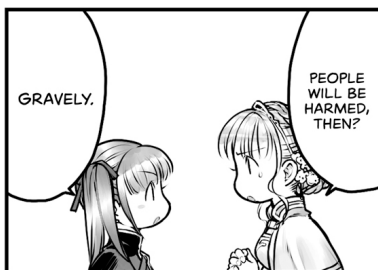
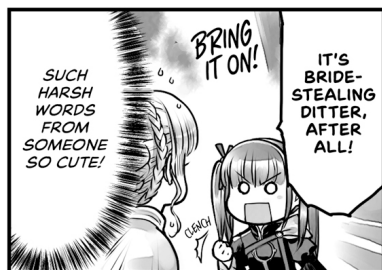
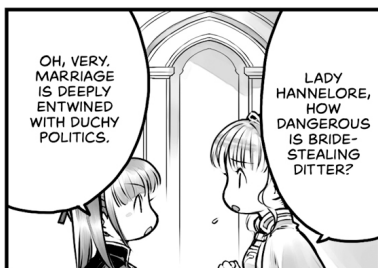
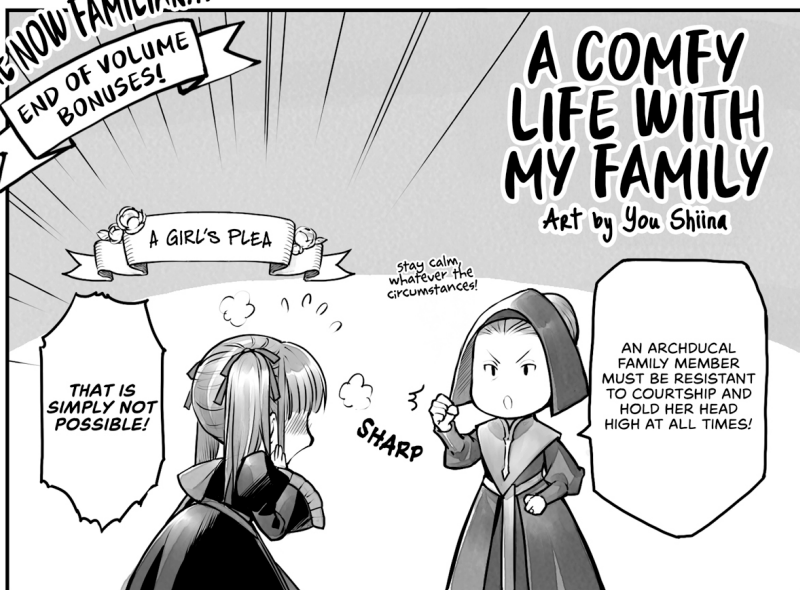
And of course, my sincerest thanks to everyone who read this book.

June 2025, Miya Kazuki

THE NOW FAMILIAR...
END OF VOLUME
BONUSES!

A COMFY LIFE WITH MY FAMILY

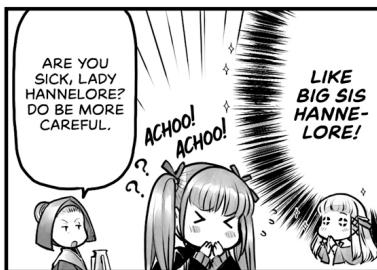
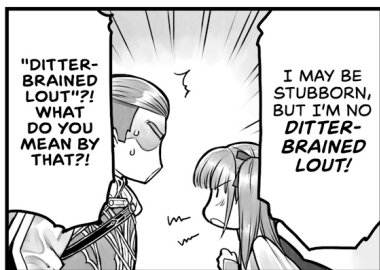
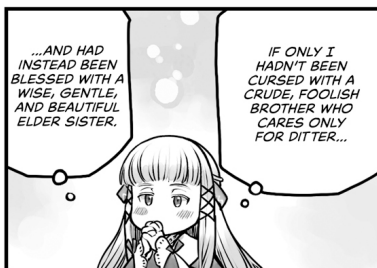
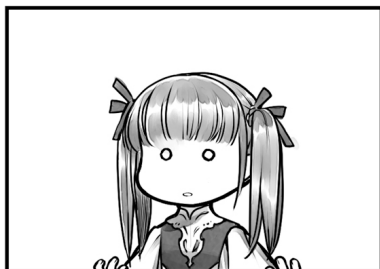
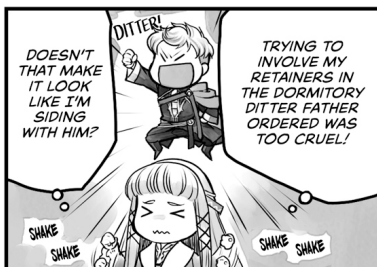
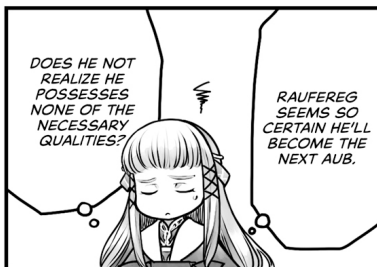
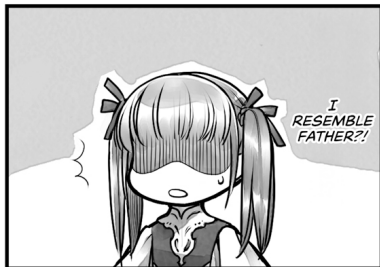
Art by You Shiina



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REBELLIOUS AGE



Cast of Characters

The story so far...

Not content with the suitors her father had chosen, Hannelore prayed for the freedom to choose for herself—only for the gods to answer with a wave of would-be husbands. Amid the ensuing commotion, the Goddess of Time descended into her to summon Rozemyne, and Hannelore was whisked away to the world of the gods. When she finally awoke, demands for bride-stealing dinner were arriving in rapid succession.



Hannelore

The protagonist. A fifth-year archduke candidate from Dunkelfelger. Now the second divine avatar as well.

Choices from the Goddess of Binding



Rasantark

A fifth-year apprentice archknight from Dunkelfelger. Lestilaut's retainer and a chosen suitor.



Kenntrips

A sixth-year apprentice archscholar from Dunkelfelger. Lestilaut's retainer and a chosen suitor.



Raufereg

A first-year archduke candidate from Dunkelfelger. The second wife's son.

Dunkelfelger's Nobility

Werdekraf

*****Aub Dunkelfelger. Hannelore's father.

Sieglinde

*****The aub's first wife. Mother of Hannelore and Lestilaut.

Lestilaut

*****The next aub. Hannelore's brother.

Einelliebe

*****An archducal family member. Lestilaut's first wife.

Reichlene

*****The aub's second wife. Mother of Raufereg and Lungtase.

Lungtase

*****Reichlene's daughter. Raufereg's younger sister.

Cordula

*****Hannelore's head attendant.

Andrea

*****A sixth-year apprentice attendant serving Hannelore.

Luitpold

*****A fifth-year apprentice scholar serving Hannelore.

Heilliese

*****A fifth-year apprentice guard knight serving Hannelore.

Vestaert

*****A sixth-year apprentice guard knight serving Lestilaut.



Ferdinand

A member of Ehrenfest's archducal family. Rozemyne's groom.



Rozemyne

Aub Alexandria. In her fifth year at the Royal Academy.



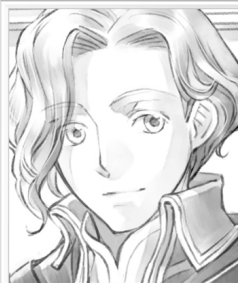
Wilfried

A fifth-year archduke candidate from Ehrenfest.



Ortwin

A fifth-year archduke candidate from Drewanchel.



Sigiswald

Aub Korinthsdaum. A former royal and Anastasius's elder brother.

Other Nobles

Eglantine

Yurgenschmidt's new Zent. A former royal.

Anastasius

Eglantine's husband. A former royal.
Now teaches the archduke candidate course.

Rauffen

Dunkelfelger's dormitory supervisor.

Hirschur

Ehrenfest's dormitory supervisor.

Trauerqual

Aub Blumenfeld. The previous Zent.

Magdalena

Trauerqual's first wife.

Hildebrand

A first-year archduke candidate from Blumenfeld.
Magdalena's son.

Letizia

A first-year archduke candidate from Alexandria.

Lieseleta

Rozemyne's head attendant.

Charlotte

A fourth-year archduke candidate from Ehrenfest.











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Ascendance of a Bookworm: Hannelore's Fifth Year at the Royal Academy Volume 2

by Miya Kazuki

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Edited by Kieran Redgewell

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